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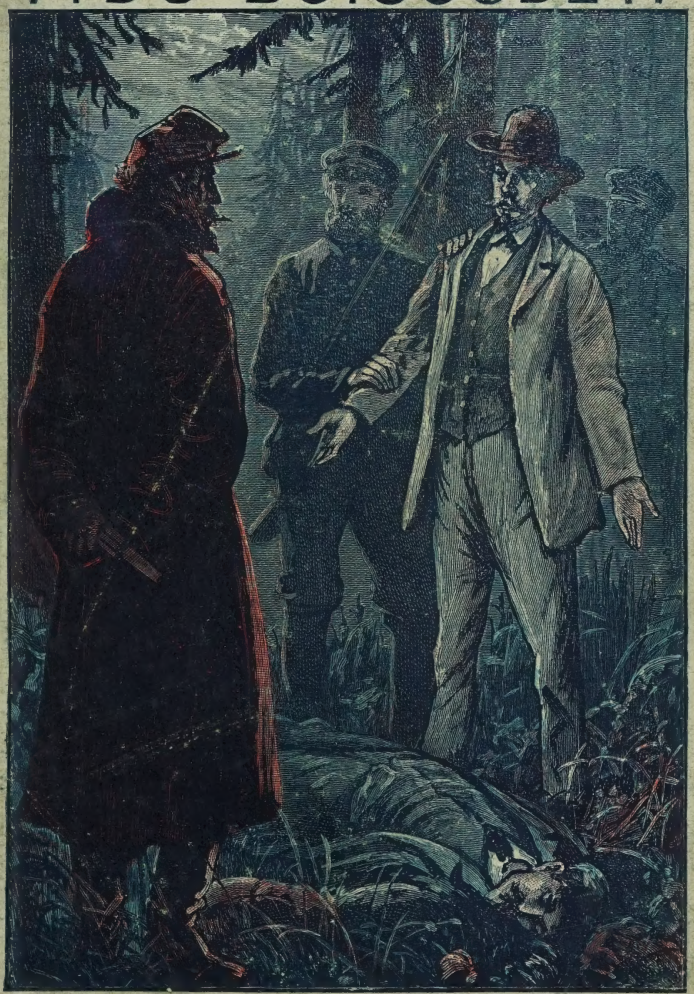

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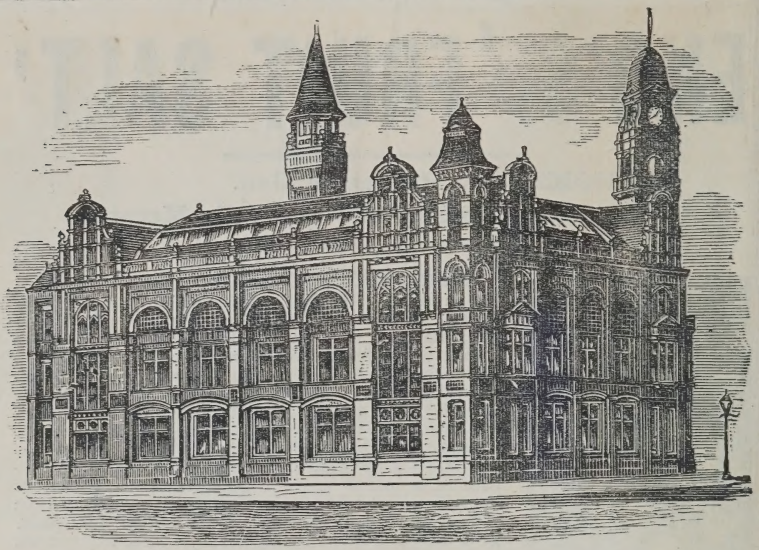

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Fortuné du Boisgobey was a popular French novelist much read in his country. He was born in Normandy, 1824, and died 1891.

Henry Llewellyn Williams, the translator, is probably of Welsh origin.

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THE

HALF-SISTER'S SECRET

(*LE SECRET DE LA CADICHONNE*

OU

LE CHALET DES PERVENCHES)

BY

FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY

AUTHOR OF 'THE CAT'S-EYE RING,' 'THE BRIDE OF A DAY,' ETC., ETC.

Translated by

HENRY LLEWELLYN WILLIAMS

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS

BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL

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1889

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THE

HALF-SISTER'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

D'ARTAGNAN AND PORTHOS.

It is the evening of a warm summer day. The sun has disappeared behind Cape Ferret. The sea-breeze rises, and the huge forest pines shudder under the gales scudding across the Atlantic. Long sharp-crested and snowy waves begin to ruffle the blue sheet of that inland sea known as the Basin of Arcachon. Chased in by the heavy weather, the fishing-smacks fly like gulls to reach the anchorage of La Teste.

The Casino is ablaze with light, on top of the high *dune* dominating the villas and the hotels in a row along the beach. There is dancing this evening, for the season is 'at its height,' as the 'high-life' newspapers say. The orchestra is tuning up already.

Gentlemen are promenading on the broad

esplanade, and gazing on the file of fair ladies who are arriving, one after another, in ball dress. They are mainly Parisians and Spaniards, but there are some from Bordeaux, and these are not the less merry.

Among these Brummels of all ages and lands moves a well-turned youth, possessor of rather a hatchet face, with an aquiline nose, large black eyes full of flame, and moustache curled up at the ends.

It was the model of D'Artagnan in 'The Three Musketeers,' a pure-blooded Gascon.

Notwithstanding inborn superiority, and the natural coolness of the sons of Aquitaine, he wears a somewhat embarrassed air amongst these correct gentlemen, clad in the latest fashion of Trouville or Biarritz.

On his way about, he exchanges nods with several men, but it is clear that he is not one of their sets.

Close to him forms a knot of half a dozen loungers, smoking nicely-smelling cigars, and talking loudly enough for him to overhear. A handsome, elderly fop sets the key, and the others laugh in chorus when he utters a good sharp saying.

'I am open to lay that the lovely Mdlles. de Briouze will not come,' he says. 'Their father has left them at the *Châlet des Pervenches*. He is already sitting at an écarté-table, where he stands alone against all comers. This fast man of another

age is incorrigible. Hang yourself, my dear Roland! You will not see the incomparable Dolores this evening.'

'I shall easily console myself,' replied the person addressed, shrugging his shoulders. 'This Frenchified Andalusian pleases me but middling. I only like the blondes.'

'That may be, but her millions would please you, I fancy. Mdlle. de Briouze would be a splendid catch, for she is the favourite in the will.'

'Briouze has not the least desire to have his will executed, and if—if, I say, he should leave Mdlle. Dolores the lion's share, it would be unfair, for she has a private fortune already, so they say, though I do not believe very strongly in it. Cash in Spain is kept in the castles in Spain.'

'Not always. I know that Don Manuel de Barrancas, father of the first Marchioness de Briouze, was very wealthy.'

'So I hope, for your Dolores' sake; but that is no reason for me to pay my addresses to her. Besides, the place is taken.'

'At Paris, yes—by the Viscount de Saint-Osvin, everybody knows that; but at Arcachon?'

'The same here, my dear fellow. The dark lady never pines alone—not even in the seaside resorts. What is amusing is that our excellent Briouze does not notice how his elder daughter carries on. Yet he has seen a great deal of life, and a man who has married twice ought to know how to play the watch-dog.'

'Eh? has she a cavalier here? who, who?'

'A Bordeaux gentleman, built like an athlete, who a little lacks aristocratic bearing; but he has manliness, which she seems to appreciate. You can hear of nothing but him. He spends his time riding up and down the Moullo Road, and the young lady comes out on the balcony of her *châlet* to see him caracole by. At present he is in the Casino, *punting* at écarté against the marquis, and winning outrageously. The proverb about "lucky at love," you know, has no common-sense.'

'Very funny, that!' chuckled the dandies, who were listening to the slanderous chatter.

'How came you to be so well informed?' inquired the old beau who had opened fire.

'I had only to prick up my ears. This chance-met gallant is about as quiet as a cannon-shot, and boastful as a true dweller on the banks of the Garonne. He is delighted that everybody knows he has made the conquest of a real nobleman's daughter, and he freely utters remarks which might cost him dear if she learnt he spoke them, for she is devilish vindictive. That artful Saint-Osvin knows how to keep the whip-hand of her, and she would suffer anything from him, but not that a rural squire should injure her fame—a person with a name ending in *ac*, and who speaks with an inimitable accent.'

'Good! now I know. It is M. Gémozac, a broad-shouldered, sun-browned blade. I can understand

that he should please this incandescent Spaniard. What is the social position of this lady-killer?'

'Of course he sells wine. Everybody in Bordeaux is a wine-merchant. However, if you are bent on knowing, you can ask him yourself—for here he comes out of the Casino—this time we have a proverb which speaks truly: "Talk of the devil and "——'

'Thanks! I am not at all eager to be informed upon his profession.'

'No doubt he is going away because Mdlle. de Briouze has not come.'

'Or because he wants to keep the money he has won from her father. But the wind is growing chill; we will catch a bad cold here. Suppose we step in? we might make a *bac*.'

'A good idea!' exclaimed the gossipers, and they proceeded to the gaming-rooms.

The young gentleman who resembled D'Artagnan had not missed one word of this conversation, and he knew its subjects of whom these jays had spoken with so much recklessness. He often had met the young ladies of the Briouze family at the Casino. He had even danced two or three times with the younger, Mdlle. Nicole. He esteemed her delightful company, and had ventured to tell her so, without her being angry.

But he particularly knew this Gémozac who had been hauled over the coals so roughly. Both came from Bordeaux.

Gémozac had seen the day in Paludate, and

Aurélien Biscaros was born in the Rue Fondaudège.

They had gone through their course of studies together in the *Lycée* of the Cours-des-Fossés, and carried out their youthful pranks at the Moulin Rouge on the Caudéran Boulevard.

But they did not resemble one another any more morally than physically.

Biscaros had all the good parts of the Gascons. He was brave, ardent, and full of heart and spirit.

Gémozac had all the bad points. A boaster, a trickster, and vain, he only thought of getting himself talked about; and, ever ready to drop the substance for the shadow, he was quite content to be believed the idol of some lady of the upper classes. 'To seem' was his motto. He was not a coward—there is no such a thing in his country—but he was too free in parading his bravery, and he was always clapping his hand to his side for a sword, so to say.

Biscaros, who knew him thoroughly, but half believed in his good fortune at love or cards, and very strongly doubted that he had subjugated a young belle of Paris who was there surrounded by worshippers much loftier in position than M. Sobieski Gémozac—for his Christian name was Sobieski. Not the only one in Bordeaux, though nobody knows why.

Biscaros was not willingly going to allow that the half-sister of Mdlle. Nicole de Briouze had stooped so low, and he credited the gossips with calumniating her.

Still, Gémozac had never boasted before him of this conquest, enviable though it was, but perhaps this was because he had guessed that his old school-fellow Aurélien secretly cherished a tender sentiment for the marquis's other charming daughter.

Biscaros hastened to profit by the chance arising to question this Lovelace.

He went straight up to him and accosted him at the moment when he was crossing the esplanade, with his hat cocked over one ear and his gait a strut like the walk of the *Capitano* in the old Italian comedy.

'You!' ejaculated Gémozac; 'you here, my little friend! you arrive just as I was going away.'

Gémozac could not have denied his origin. In his mouth, all the *e's* took the acute accent, and the syllables, properly faintly spoken, rolled out sonorously. He rattled the *o's*, in the reverse way to that of natives of Provence, who *snore* them out. And he did not pepper his emphatic speech with *sandis* and *cadédis*, only because these obsolete oaths are out of fashion, even in Gascony.

'Why are you going away so soon?' inquired Biscaros, who only had a trifling accent, just enough to make his speech pungent. 'It is scarcely ten o'clock. Since when have you been going to roost at the hens' hour?'

'To begin with, I am not going to roost,' replied the Sobieski of the Paludate, with a knowing look.

'Next, I come from netting seven thousand francs at écarté, and I want to keep them. I step out before Fortune reverses her wheel.'

'You do well, but——'

'I won them from the Marquis de Briouze, and I am going to employ them for making a little trip to Paris pretty soon. It is he who will thus pay my expenses. That's funny, is it not?'

'I do not see in what it is funny.'

'Never mind. I know what I am talking about. You ought to come to Paris with me.'

'I have not the same reasons as you for treating myself to a pleasure-trip. I have not been winning at play.'

'And you have no acquaintances in the capital? Never mind that. I will introduce you.'

'I was not aware you had a wide circle of acquaintances in Parisian society.'

'I am going to establish a wide circle. I have the means.'

'Receive all my best compliments, dear friend. Thanks for your goodwill; but I am jolly here, and I shall stay to the end of the season.'

The pair of friends had been walking whilst talking, and, after having crossed the Casino garden, they had come to a line of rails, before which ran a road from the strand to the *Ville-d'hiver*, a long row of villas and *châlets* scattered among the pines.

'So you are going back to the Grand Hotel?' queried Gémozac.

'Dear me, yes!' responded the other. 'And you?'

'I am going the opposite way.'

'Into the forest—at dead o' night? With some thousand francs in your pocket? Don't you know that a gentleman coming out of the gaming-rooms was attacked and robbed, the day before yesterday?'

'Pooh! some Parisian "masher." I fear nothing.'

'Are you armed, at least?'

'I have my fists.'

'They will not preserve you from a pistol-shot. But what the mischief are you looking for on the roads at this hour?'

'I am going to see if there be any letter for me at my post-office.'

'What a stupid joke!'

'I am not joking. In the woods yonder I have a letter-box, where I call for my correspondence every evening.'

'Your correspondence?' exclaimed Biscaros. 'With whom?'

'That, my little friend, is my secret,' replied Gémozac, throwing out his chest like a pouter pigeon.

'Come, come! You want to make me believe that you have captivated one of the lovely ladies who live in the Winter Villas. Get along with you, you humbug!'

'It is possible I am humbugging; but I am not going to tell you any more. I am discreet.'

'As anyone can see,' said Biscaros ironically. 'I shall not question you any farther. But you might as well admit that you only have an appointment under a pine-tree with a resin-gatherer's daughter. Some of them are very pretty; but, mark you, it is not pleasant to go sweethearting amongst them, for their fathers and brothers do not trifle. You ought to let me accompany you; in case some jealous swain fell upon you, I might lend you a hand.'

'It is useless, my dear friend. I do not have anything to do with the resin-girls, and if I have a skein to disentangle with a rival, it will be on the duelling-ground, sword in hand. But you are in my way this evening. Do you understand?'

'Thoroughly. Still, I advise you to keep your eye open on the road, for, I repeat, since sometime lately, the forest is not safe. Prowlers strange to this district are watching for the nocturnal strollers, to rob them, and you will be a good prize since you are lined with gold.'

'Gold is not the word. I have fifty louis in my fob, and six crisp thousand-franc notes in my pocket-book, which I can do without this evening. Will you do me the service of keeping them for me until to-morrow morning? You will be sleeping when I get back to the Grand Hotel, but I shall come in to arouse you in the morning.'

'As you please. At any rate, if you are waylaid in the woods you will not lose much.'

'Yes, it is more prudent. Here is the plunder—

the wherewithal to spend three agreeable months in Paris. I entrust you with my fortune and the future of my love. But how about yourself, if you should be attacked?'

'Only five minutes' walk from the Boulevard de la Plage? There is no danger, and, besides, I answer for your six thousand.'

'Oh, I am not uneasy. You are good for a hundred thousand crowns, which you inherited from your father. Mine did not leave me so much, but I know how to be content on little, and riches do not make happiness.

'"Fair women! fair women! there's nothing like you!"'

hummed Gémozac to Offenbach's tune. 'When a fellow pleases them, he can comfort himself for having a meagre income. On which, my good fellow, I leave you. I am expected, and I do not want to miss the trysting-time.'

Having thus spoken, the victorious Gémozac left in his companion's hands the pocket-book, puffed out with bank-notes, and turned to climb the steep road ascending to the Winter Villas.

Biscaros had merely to descend in the contrary direction to go into the Grand Hotel of Arcachon, but he did not hasten to take that direction.

He remained standing in the midst of the road, watching Gémozac, who went away at a quick step.

At intervals the moon shone between clouds,

driven by the wind, and illumined the tall figure of the Bordeaux Don Juan.

Biscaros was very much perplexed. He perceived a foundation of truth through the brag of his friend, and he began to believe that the gossips on the terrace were not wrong in asserting that he was the *inamorato* of the marquis's elder daughter.

The ridiculous tale of the forest letter-box had been, no doubt, invented by Gémozac to mask an appointment made by Mdlle. de Briouze at the Periwinkles Châlet.

Yet she did not dwell there alone. Her half-sister Nicole was also an inmate.

The idea of Gémozac stealing into that dwelling nocturnally, with the complicity of a madcap, perturbed and irritated the romantic Aurélien.

At the Casino dances, Mdlle. Nicole had made a profound impression upon him. He did not yet acknowledge to himself that he already loved her, but it pained him to think of evil entering beneath the roof where reposed the chaste and bewitching girl who had acquired a hold over his heart.

Lovers' instinct spurred him to verify the fact, and the occasion was good to learn what was going on : he had merely to follow Gémozac.

Yet he wavered. Such an espial was repugnant to him. To shake off the scruples staying him, he was obliged to say to himself that Gémozac was running the risk of being assaulted on the road,

and would perhaps need help against the footpads who had made much talk, since a few days, in this honest and peaceable land of Arcachon.

Biscaros remembered that, with foresight as regarded an undesirable meeting, he had provided himself with a good six-chambered revolver.

Strolling along the beach, before going up to the Casino, he had amused himself by sending a bullet after a gull, which had missed it; but there were still five shots to fire, enough to put to flight, or bring down, a whole gang of highwaymen.

This reasoning decided him.

'I must have my heart clear,' he said between his clenched teeth. 'Gémozac does not notice me on his track, and, if I see him enter the Periwinkles, I shall be settled on the fact.'

His plans stopped there, for, assuredly, he did not think to betray to the marquis that his elder daughter's flirtations were threatening to go too far; but he wished to see how things stood.

Gémozac had made some progress by this time. He had about attained the culminating point of the rising ground, and Biscaros could hardly still distinguish his giant-like form.

The sky grew more and more obscure, and in the gloom it was difficult not to lose sight of a man who had a start.

The dilemma was, not to be distanced and not to get too near; for Gémozac, if he perceived his companion were following, would probably try to mislead him.

Biscaros, who had sharp eyes and sound limbs, knew how to manage to avoid both errors.

He set to running as far as the hill-top. When reaching it, he saw Gémozac again, quietly going the opposite slope, and he acted like him.

The roads through the Forest of Arcachon are traced in sand, and that deadens the sound of footfalls. Besides, the gale had commenced the war declared previously, and the crashing of the pines which it swayed covered all other noises.

In such weather, where could this fiery Gascon of a Gémozac be bound?

Biscaros doubted still that it was to the Periwinkles Châlet; for at night all roads look alike, and Biscaros had never but once, and in broad daylight, passed before this villa, since two months only occupied by the Briouzes.

After reflection, he even inclined anew to the opinion that Gémozac, in flying off upon this nocturnal course, had only thought of appearing as a lady-killer, and would, after a walk out to the Winter Villas, return inoffensively to Arcachon.

Nevertheless, Gémozac seemed to know whither he was going, for he advanced without hesitation, and turned to the left and then to the right with the assurance of a man who thoroughly knew the ground he was upon.

Less familiar with the woodland roads, Biscaros had difficulty in following them; and he was questioning himself as to whether he had not

better give it up, when he perceived that Gémozac moderated his pace.

At this juncture, the gale, doubling in violence, suddenly swept away the clouds, and the moon lighted up the landscape.

A majestic country-house appeared amid the pines ; scarred by the gashes made by the resin-gatherers, the trunks arose like wounded giants.

This time Biscaros recognised the Periwinkles Châlet, and stopped short to observe from afar the movements of his disquieting companion.

How would the adventure finish ?

Gémozac had evidently not come out here for nothing. No doubt he was expected. But by whom ?

An idea flashed into the loving Aurélien's mind that Gémozac came to see the *younger* daughter, but he drove away the maddening libel at once.

What likelihood was there of this vulgar fellow having fascinated any young lady ? He was rather fashioned to please a housemaid.

At the Châlet there was such a one, whom Biscaros had noticed on his way by, a *cadichonne* marvellously pretty. The Cadichonne is the Bordeaux *grisette*, a disappearing type. This one was named Bernadette, and had been in the Briouzes' service only since the family's coming, when she was enlisted on the spot.

'Capital!' said Aurélien to himself, rubbing his hands ; 'our poor Sobieski's lady of high degree is a housemaid. Of course ! I suspected so. I am delighted with it, and I forgive him his boasting;

though, really, it was not nice to damage a lady's character by trumpeting about everywhere as he has done.'

After a very short delay, the Sobieski in question started abruptly from the road, and proceeded, not towards the villa, but to a tall pine-tree standing isolated from the others, like an outpost—a pine with a large cleft in it, and an earthenware cup at the base of the slash to catch the resin.

'Good again!' thought Biscaros, more and more set at ease; 'his Cadichonne is awaiting him under that big tree. She has given him a tryst in the open air: it is a true idyl.'

He glanced at the Châlet, and saw a small spark glitter at a window on the first floor—a signal, perhaps.

Now all was clear to him, and he might leave Gémozac to his rustic courtship; but, out of pure curiosity, he still lingered a little before going back to rest.

He saw his adventurous friend stealthily approach the old pine; but no Cadichonne showed herself.

For that matter, Gémozac did not seem to look for any. He set to feeling the tree-trunk with uplifted arms, and Biscaros, puzzled by this inexplicable pantomime, resumed the belief that his latter conjectures were wrong, and that Bernadette did not expect her robust swain.

What, then, was the latter searching for?

Everything seemed to indicate that the occupants of the silent summer-house were slumbering already,

with the exception of the person in the lighted room.

Was it to announce his arrival that he was thus gesticulating, and then was he going to glide around to the residence to enter it by the back-stairs?

Biscaros could understand nothing of it now, but the sequel did not keep him waiting.

A flash shone under the trees, accompanied by a detonation.

Gémozac uttered a shriek, reeled, endeavoured to cling to the tree, but fell away, whirling round, and dropped in a heap.

First impulse is not always the best.

Biscaros darted to the help of his friend; but he had reason afterwards to deplore his having only listened to his heart, and not having rushed firstly in pursuit of the murderer, at whatever the risk of receiving a bullet.

It certainly was not the fear of running that danger which retained him; for the murderer, if in hiding in the wood, might as readily fire on him whilst he was lifting up Gémozac.

He found the unlucky man lying at the foot of the old pine, and giving no other tokens of life save a death-rattle and convulsive shudderings.

He knelt down, hurriedly tore open the clothes, and found that Gémozac had been hit fair in the breast. A large blackish spot stained the shirt, and the blood flowed from a wound through the skin a little beneath the right clavicle. At every

effort to breathe made by poor Sobieski, a red scum frothed upon his lips.

The projectile had gone clean through the lung and out at the back, breaking the omoplate.

The shot had been fired very closely, and had made so faint a report that it must have been from a small-bore.

Nevertheless Biscaros had only seen the ray of light across the shadows. The marksman had remained in the gloom.

Biscaros raised Gémozac and set him up with his back against the scarred tree; he surrounded him by his arms to prop him up, and called on the dying man several times; the answer was a deep sigh. The last breath of life thus came forth. The head drooped upon the shoulder, and the body fell heavily again on the ensanguined soil.

A shower of gold pieces gushed from the yawning pocket where Gémozac, on leaving off card-play, had put the louis won from M. de Briouze, and scattered among the withered grass forming a litter underneath the dome of the resinous glade.

Biscaros never thought to pick up this dispersed treasure. But he could not leave his unfortunate friend here.

He did not reason that it would be prudent to quit the spot and keep silent over this fatal adventure. Nobody then would know that he had been witness of the crime, and he would not be examined in connection with it.

He did not make this selfish calculation, we say.

He thought that all hope of reanimating Gémozac was not perhaps lost, and that the Periwinkles Villa being but fifty paces off, he might find assistance there, if only to carry away a corpse which he would not leave to the night-roving animals.

He rose with a bound and ran to the villa.

It was constructed on the model of the Pereire Châlet, the largest and handsomest along the beach: a wood-and-brick house, adorned with ornamental balconies, surrounded by a veranda, and pierced with a number of doors and windows.

All these apertures were closed, and the light, lately sparkling on the first floor, had disappeared.

But it was unlikely that everybody was asleep in this rustic pleasure-house. Admitting that the young ladies had already retired, the servants ought to be sitting up to await the marquis, belated at the Casino.

Without taking the time to find the bell, Biscaros hammered with his fist on the principal door of the ground floor.

The door did not open.

He shouted an appeal for aid with all his might. No one came.

They must have enjoyed a sound sleep in the Periwinkles.

The discouraged Biscaros finally believed that the young ladies had determined at the last hour to go to the Casino ball, and that their domestics, including the Cadichonne Bernadette, had profited

by the absence of the masters, to go for diversion elsewhere.

No doubt the light he had perceived was a night-light, which had burnt itself out.

The assassin had had time to flee. He was probably afar by this, and there was no use running after him.

Biscaros, therefore, had nothing better to do than reach Arcachon at all speed, where he would find the persons to deal with the matter : police officers, or gendarmes, or a magistrate of his acquaintance, come from Bordeaux to take the sea-bathing during the legal vacation, and lodging, like him, at the Grand Hotel.

Summoned by a witness of a crime, all this judiciary force would go to the scene and proceed to operations, which might end in the murderer's arrest.

This hope was the solitary consolation left to Biscaros, heart-broken at having lost his friend. He could not resuscitate him, but he might at all events contribute to his being revenged.

He had serious thoughts for an instant of applying for help at the neighbouring villas ; but if he obtained it, this would not much modify the position. He therefore persisted in his resolution to go for assistance to Arcachon.

Still, before quitting the spot, he wished to try again to get into communication with the tenant of the Periwinkles Châlet, who would not refuse to keep the body of Gémozac until justice arrived.

He had tried the principal front on the roadside, but there ought to be another entrance to the silent abode facing the forest.

He set out to make the circuit, in order again to endeavour to attract the attention of those who had not been aroused by his outcries.

This second attempt no better succeeded than the former. In vain did he shout and knock. Nothing stirred in the interior, and he had to give up the hope of making himself heard.

Nothing remained but to retake the road to the shore, which compelled him to pass close to the dead man.

At the moment when he turned the corner of the house, behind which he had remained ten minutes, he stopped, stupefied at perceiving a man bending over the dead body with all the appearance of searching it.

CHAPTER II.

THE WRONG MAN, OF COURSE.

THIS man would surely be the assassin, who had retraced his steps to despoil his victim during the short absence of Biscaros.

It was the climax of audacity, and a certain proof that he had killed Gémozac to rob him.

Biscaros did not remember that this wretch of a murderer was armed, inasmuch as he had just shot poor Sobieski, and that the main thing was to seize him in the very act.

He was full of courage, but on this occasion he lacked coolness, for instead of softly creeping up to collar the ruffian, who turned his back on him and could not have seen him coming, he ran at him with his revolver in his grasp, shouting :

'Surrender, villain, or you die !'

Warned by this sounding threat, the man briskly rose and dashed off as fast as legs could carry him through the pine-woods, without trying to defend himself, or even looking behind.

Biscaros had only the one means of stopping him, and that he used. He was not over twenty-

five paces from the fugitive, whom he saw quite clearly by the moonshine, momentarily free from passing clouds.

He took aim at him, and when he believed he had him in the line from the sight-piece he pulled the trigger.

Unfortunately, at that very nick, the moon was eclipsed behind a flying cloud, and the man disappeared in the shade projected by the tall trees.

He had not fallen, but ran on at full speed, for Biscaros heard the twigs snap under the precipitate footfalls of the cowardly rascal.

He might have been hit, but not seriously enough to prevent his flight, and it would have been folly to pursue him into the heart of the woods, where he might ambush himself and fire at close range.

It was no doubt with the intention of luring his pursuer on that the runaway abstained from returning his fire now.

He did not mean to miss.

Biscaros, who had already recovered his presence of mind, divined this plot, and instead of carrying the chase any farther, he turned back.

He found his friend still extended on the spot where he had been shot, and his idea was that, fearing he had not killed him outright, the rogue had returned to finish him with the knife.

He wished to make sure of this surmise, and ran to the corpse, which he found in the position as he

left it, the face upturned to the sky and the arms stretched out straight. The staring eyes seemed to look up in a call for vengeance.

The small wound perforating the bosom no longer bled, and Gémozac had received no others.

On his knees, Biscaros examined it closely, and had no difficulty in observing that robbery had followed the murder a quarter of an hour after the pistol-shot first fired. The waistcoat pockets had been turned inside out and cleared. The gold won from the Marquis de Briouze, and scattered about when Gémozac fell, had disappeared.

The assassin had completed his criminal work by robbing the man whom he had slain, and he had let nothing escape him save one gold piece slipping through his fingers during the operation; it gleamed on the dead man's black trousers.

Biscaros took heed not to touch this coin forgotten by the highwayman whom he had surprised. It was a piece of evidence which might aid the magistrate to understand the dreadful incident of the corpse searched by the slayer.

But Biscaros could not make up his mind to leave this poor frame without making sure that there did not remain a breath of life.

He had not always to praise Gémozac, but he was his fellow-countryman, and had been his playfellow, and at this moment he only remembered his good parts.

He lowered his face to his to discover that he no longer breathed, and without putting down his

revolver from his right hand, he laid his other hand on the breast over the heart.

It had ceased to beat, and the body was already cold. Biscaros had nothing to do but get away for good from this fatal glade, and yet he lingered before rising to his feet.

He wondered whether he had not better wait here until the return home of M. de Briouze, bound to re-enter his villa when he should have lost all his money at écarté, and if the hunt for the officials and constabulary might not bring trouble upon him.

He was still in his deliberation when a pair of vigorous hands came down on his shoulders.

'We've bagged him!' roared a coarse voice. 'This time he cannot escape us, for he's been taken in the act.'

'Pull him up and clap on the handcuffs,' said another voice, not so rough.

Biscaros had so little expected this aggression that he did not at the first understand at all what had happened to him, and he was so perturbed that he fancied for an instant that the assassin had made a return on the offensive, or that a supernatural intervention was taking place.

He had not heard these assailants come up to attack him from behind and seize him before he had time to defend himself.

The uproar of the gale, shaking the high boughs, had smothered the sound of their footsteps.

He did not try to resist, but let the man, who had grasped him by the collar, pull him up on his feet.

Five men stood by: four uniformed wood-rangers and a gentleman, clad in black from top to toe, and wearing a military cap laced with silver.

The keepers carried hunting-knives in their belts, and rifles in sling-straps. The gentleman wore a tricoloured scarf under his long topcoat, and had an ivory-knobbed cane, on which he leant.

He had the demeanour and aspect of a commissary of police conducting a patrol, and he arrived timely, as Biscaros had intended to go after him at Arcachon.

'Let me go,' said he, without emotion. 'You can clearly see that I do not want to get away.'

'Disarm him,' commanded the police official.

'Don't take the trouble,' replied Biscaros, presenting him with the revolver, which he held by the barrel, butt outwards. 'Now, monsieur, you can no longer suspect my intentions, and I hope you will please tell me why you take so many precautions against me. I have not, that I know of, the look of a malefactor.'

'Looks go for nothing,' growled the commissary, prudently putting the firearm away in his overcoat pocket.

'Granted — but when you learn who I am: Aurélien Biscaros, landowner, residing at No. 10, Rue St. Laurent, at Bordeaux.'

'Very likely; but I am the police inspector of Arcachon. I have found you beside a dead body, and my first duty is to secure your person.'

'You cannot suspect me of having killed——'

'This gentleman who lies at your feet? Certainly I do, and I shall believe, until proof to the contrary, that you alone must have committed the crime. When I arrived, you were holding the revolver you made use of. You cannot deny having fired the shot, which we heard, for the barrel is still warm, and black with powder.'

'Indeed I fired; but upon the assassin, whom I unfortunately missed, and he buried himself in the forest. Instead of questioning me, you ought to send your men in his pursuit. They may catch him if I wounded him.'

'I know my duty, and I need lessons from no one,' dryly returned the commissary, cut to the quick. 'You are the assassin. Confess so, and tell me why you slew this man?'

'I did not slay him. He was my friend—my old schoolfellow—and he is still better known in Bordeaux than I am—he is Sobieski Gémozac, of Paludate.'

'I know—a professional gambler—a frequenter of our Casino! He was there this evening, and won considerably at écarté. He must have had money upon him. You would know that, and you dogged him when he came out.'

'Yes. I did follow him, because I feared he would be attacked, as happened the day before yesterday to a gentleman going home after the card-play.'

'The fact which decided me into taking command this evening of a night-round. I have not

lost my time, since I have caught you. There's nothing to be done farther but take you to the town.'

'All I ask——'

'I shall soon afford you the satisfaction. But first I must complete my inquiry, which I cannot do in the open air. To whom does that villa belong? You ought to know.'

'I believe it is occupied by strangers to the town—Parisians.'

'The Marquis de Briouze and his family, commissary,' said one of the rangers.

'Well! I will require this nobleman to put one of the ground-floor rooms at my disposition, and there resume the interrogatory proceedings.'

Addressing the rangers, he added:

'Two of you stay here to guard the body whilst I am in the villa—another go notify the gendarmerie—another come with me to watch this person in custody.'

Aurélien had already become a 'person in custody.'

This designation made him shiver. Now he comprehended the danger menacing him, and the idea of appearing before the inmates of the Châlet in this dreadful position into which fatality had thrown him alarmed him still more than an accusation, which he hoped victoriously to refute.

What would Mdlle. Nicole de Briouze think of him if she beheld him treated as a criminal? And if her sister appeared, how could he say in her

presence that Gémozac had boasted of having a love-meeting arranged with a young lady of title?

'What, monsieur!' cried out Biscaros, 'do you talk of questioning me in that villa? I refuse to follow you thither.'

'You will only oblige me to employ main force. My men shall drag you there if you do not willingly come.'

'Do what you please. Only I warn you that they will not open the door to you.'

'How do you know that?'

'I uselessly knocked at all the doors.'

'You! At what moment? And to what end?'

'To demand succour! I had seen my unfortunate friend fall, and I hoped that he still lived. I called, but not a soul came. No doubt the masters are away.'

'But the servants have not retired—look at the light.'

Biscaros, whose back was turned to the villa, spun half round, and was much astonished to see two of the ground-floor windows brilliantly lighted up. It was a downright illumination, which did not extend to the floor above, where not the least brightness gleamed, not even a night-light.

What, then, could be happening in this dwelling where all had seemed latterly to be reposing? There was reason to believe now that a party was to be given. Biscaros could not explain this sudden awakening of persons who had not been aroused by the shots or his outcries.

'You hardly will still argue that nobody is there,' ironically said the police official. 'It will suit me capitally in there to interrogate you, and I shall see clearly to draw up my report.'

'Commissary! somebody's a-coming,' muttered one of the forest-rangers, pointing out with his finger a shadow stealing amongst the trees.

'One of the villa servants, no doubt. He comes in the very nick. Hilloa! You, yonder! Come forward! I want to speak to you.'

The shadow instantly came out of the pine-groves, and by the moonbeams, completely unveiled from clouds, it was visible that this was a woman.

Biscaros wondered if it were not one of the young ladies, aroused late by the hubbub made around their dwelling, and his heart ached at the thought of appearing before the charming Nicole between two forest-keepers.

He was speedily set at ease upon that score.

The woman wore the local head-dress, a handkerchief tied up well at the back of the head in a bow-knot over the hair. She arrived at a brisk pace, and did not appear at all abashed.

Eager to know with whom he had to deal, tne chief of police went to meet her, and he was about opening his lips to challenge her, when she ejaculated with the local accent:

'Bless me! it's Monsieur Gujan!'

'Do you know me?' said the stupefied official.

'I rather think I do! And you know me, too!

You saw me when I was a little lass—Bernadette—the daughter of Ginestras, the revenue officer of La Teste.'

'What is this, you minx? What are you doing here?'

'I am in service to the Marquis de Briouze, who has hired the Periwinkles Châlet for the season. Mdlle. Nicole took me for her own maid a couple of months ago.'

'Does she allow you to ramble about the woods at night?'

'She gave me leave for the evening after dinner. I have been for a walk to Arcachon to buy me some fancy slippers at the bazaar on the Boulevard de la Plage, and I am hurrying home to attend upon my young lady, who never retires before midnight. On coming up I spied a crowd. What's the matter? Have you caught the scamp who was a-robbing folk on the Moullo Road?'

'Maybe so. But, tell me, did you not hear fire-arms?'

'I have heard nothing but the wind in the branches, and I have not met so much as a cat.'

'Are you not afraid to travel the roads all alone?'

'Me? Oh dear, no! The man is not born who would frighten me.'

'Come, come, puss! confess you have been walking out with your sweetheart.'

'Not a bit of it. My sweetheart is a long way off, and I never run after him.'

The commissary evidently suspected Bernadette

of knowing more than she cared to tell, and it was not without grounds that he questioned her.

But he perceived that he was wasting his time, and he deferred the continuation of his inquiry to a fitter occasion.

'Are your masters having a party this evening?' he asked, pointing to the illuminated windows.

'Not more than usual. The dining-room chandelier has been lit because the marquis is expected. He is at the Casino, and will have supper on coming home.'

'With the young ladies?'

'Mdlle. de Briouze is not well, and she went to lie down immediately after dinner. At this hour there would be nobody up in the house except Mdlle. Nicole, the valet to wait on master at supper, and Cook in the kitchen. The coachman has gone away with the carriage to take master to the Casino, and he will bring him home when the game is over.'

'Very well. Do me the pleasure of going and telling the valet that I want a room where I can be alone.'

'What for?"

'To write. I need not occupy it long, and I will explain the matter to your master if he comes in before I shall have finished my task.'

'Oho! then you have arrested somebody, for sure. Is that your prisoner there? I should like to see him.'

This dialogue passed off on the edge of the glade

which ran from the road to the villa, close to the corpse screened by the rangers grouped around Biscaros.

On a wave of M. Gujan's hand they parted. Bernadette perceived the body extended on its back, and, clasping her hands, screamed:

'O, living God! a dead man under our windows!'

The police official had prepared this theatrical *tableau*, relying on it to extract some unstudied words from La Cadichonne, whom he continued vaguely to suspect.

His 'effect' failed.

Bernadette had only invoked in Gascon patois 'the living God—*Diou bibant!*' and did not appear much affected by suddenly seeing a dead body at her feet.

She seemed rather disgusted than frightened by the unexpected sight.

'You ought to know this man,' resumed M. Gujan, asserting what is false to obtain truth, as the saying goes.

'Now, however should I know the poor soul?' retorted La Cadichonne. 'It's a "swell"—a Parisian—as anybody can see from his dress.'

'He belongs to Bordeaux. Draw nearer, my lass, and look at him closely. The moon is full on him.'

Bernadette stepped forward without hesitation, bent over, and, attentively scanning the dead face, she exclaimed:

'But I do know him! it's M. Gémozac, of Paludate.'

'Just so—how do you come to know him?'

'From often seeing him ride by our place, and I know his name because he once told it to our footman, who helped him to tighten the girth on the road, and got a fine five-franc piece given him.'

'So it was true,' thought Biscaros, 'what those gentlemen said on the terrace of the Casino. Gémozac did come and parade before this house.'

'He came by this evening on foot,' proceeded Bernadette, 'and the ruffians killed him to rob him. Look! the villain who shot him let a louis fall when he was searching his pockets.'

'You have good eyes, little one, and you have guessed right,' said the commissary. 'Do you know this gentleman?' he inquired, indicating Biscaros.

'I have never seen him unless one day I was waiting for my young lady at the Casino door, and a young gentleman resembling him bowed to her; but I am not sure of him.'

'Then you would not know his name?'

'Not a bit.'

'You have no need to know it,' abruptly concluded M. Gujan. 'Go and tell the valet who is going to see to the supper that I want a table and writing materials.'

'In the hall, eh?'

'The *hall?*' repeated the official inquiringly.

'Yes, we talk here as they do in Paris. It is a large room on the ground floor, with a library and billiard-table in it.'

'Precisely what I need,'

'Then you will come there with the gentleman?'

'For an hour or two, as I stated.'

'But the body—the poor body here; I hope you are not going to have that carried into our house.'

'The body will stay where it is until I am through. Besides, it is useless your acquainting the ladies. I will explain to the marquis if he returns before I go. But do what I tell you, and quickly—I have no time to lose.'

Without replying, Bernadette took the road towards the house, and Aurélien, who watched her, saw her open, with a key she carried, that door at which he had vainly hammered.

The adventure was turning out badly for him. He hoped, of course, to justify himself, but he wished this provincial policeman in a warmer place for being so set upon collecting evidence under the Marquis de Briouze's roof. Unfortunately he could not prevent it, and he made ready to endure this painful trial. He felt strong in his innocence, and, provided the witching Nicole should not see him on the rack, the outcome of his unlucky arrest did not immeasurably alarm him.

As he had announced, the commissary cast the parts to his four forest-warders. Two he posted as sentries beside the corpse; one he sent to Arcachon, after giving him supplementary instructions, spoken too low for Biscaros to hear them, and he kept the fourth under his hand.

This was really a useless precaution, for the prisoner did not dream of resistance or flight.

Shadowy forms were visible passing to and fro before the dining-room windows, and soon two other windows on the same floor were lit up.

This was a sign that the marquis's valet-de-chambre was executing the order transmitted by Bernadette, and the foresighted commissary had no more to do than install himself in the hall, temporarily transformed into an examination-room.

'Come,' said he to Aurélien, who raised no difficulties about following him.

Many of the villa residences are not built between a garden behind and a courtyard in front, like country-houses near Paris. They have been run up amongst the pines without other enclosure than wooden palings, and access is facilitated merely by felling trees between the house and the highway.

This clearing takes the place of carriage-sweep. The garden is the Forest, which advantageously replaces the largest timbered park, for it extends without break almost as far as Bayonne.

Thus was situated the Periwinkles Châlet, at equal distance between the Winter Villas and the maritime town, in a wild nook, at the foot of a wooded, sandy hill, and amongst giant pines.

The marquis and his daughters, who had occupied it two months, accommodated themselves very well for the passing camping-down.

They led the free existence of settlers in the American Far West, whilst they had enough ser-

vants not to want for any of the comforts of civilized life, and ran none of the dangers to which isolation would have exposed them in a less secure land.

M. de Briouze took long walks in the morning with one or both daughters, and often escorted them in the afternoon to the Casino ; they delighted in music and seldom missed a concert.

It was by an exception that both had stayed at home whilst their father was playing heavily at écarté.

Nicole adored her father, and as Dolores did not share in the sentiment to as great a degree, this in itself somewhat estranged them, and when he was not by they saw little of one another. It was like the juggler's rings—two being never unitable save by a third, which can link the pair. Nicole, therefore, kept her room, and perhaps neither of them would come to the marquis's supper if he returned very late.

Both young mistresses being thus out of the way, the servants, handed over to themselves, so to say, hastened to go about their business or pleasure. They were always allowed to be out till ten p.m., and liberally took advantage of the permission.

They were entering by the servants' entrance when Bernadette did so by the front door to tell the valet, setting the table, about the near-at-hand visit of the chief of the Arcachon police.

This valet, a sceptical Parisian whom nothing astonished, put but very few questions to Berna-

dette—no friend of his, because she had disdained his attentions.

Prouder than many a high-born lady, our Bordeaux maid did not care for the upper servants. She preferred the lads of free Gascony. But she was a virtuous girl, and any feeling she entertained for one of her fellow-countrymen would be with the best of intentions.

After having transmitted to François the orders of M. Gujan, most methodical of police authorities, she hastened to go up to her own mistress, not to tell her what had happened, for she did not want to frighten her, but to excuse herself for having a little abused the permission of absence.

CHAPTER III.

THE BADGER AND THE LION.

BERNADETTE found her young mistress quietly reading, and she at once saw that she had heard nothing.

Nicole's windows looked out on the hill which towered above the villa, and the open-air tragedy had not been performed on that side.

Nicole de Briouze was adorably lovely, with a touching and winning beauty ; her fairness had no vapidity ; the complexion was lilies and roses ; the large blue eyes of infinite sweetness and the features of aristocratic fineness. Tall, lithe and slender, she much resembled her father, who had been a fascinating gallant in his prime and a finished type of distinction.

She looked an English lord's daughter with less stiffness and more gracefulness.

Bernadette was as pretty as she, but of altogether another kind. Rather undersized than tall, she was dark-complexioned, yet pallid, like Night, with a mirthful mouth, dazzling teeth, and a tempting physiognomy, changing expression every moment as the sea changes hue. Brisk as a bee,

quite the reverse of her mistress, who was calm, gentle, and a trifle sad.

The contrast was striking, and yet Nicole had taken a liking to this Abigail picked up by chance on the shore of the Basin of Arcachon. During the two months Bernadette had served her she had learnt to value her devotedness, and she no longer treated her as a mere domestic.

She had never been familiar with anybody, but she conformed this once to the custom of the country and spoke freely with her.

The grateful girl would have thrown herself into the fire for the marquis's younger daughter.

On the other hand, she would not have singed the tip of her little finger for the first daughter. Not that it was needed, as this lady had a companion of her own, a veritable Spanish duenna, who would not mingle with the household and was held in abhorrence by them all.

'I have been waiting for you, my lass,' said Nicole. 'What time is it?'

'It will soon be midnight, mademoiselle, and I beg you to excuse me. I was made late by gossiping with a shopkeeper of the Boulevard de la Plage.'

'You were naughty. Something bad might have befallen you, returning here in the night over deserted roads through the Forest.'

'Pooh! there was splendid moonlight.'

'That makes no difference! it is very imprudent be alone on the roads. I hear there have been people lately attacked'

'One gentleman whom they tried to rob. I have nothing to lose.'

'Pardon me, the brigands might take a kiss, according to theatrical traditions of such gentry,' said Mdlle. Nicole, smiling, 'for you are young and pretty. However, it is fortunate you have had no awkward adventures. But,' she continued, 'are you quite sure you have not experienced one—your face is not as usual?'

'Oh, but it is, mistress!'

'Nay, you are not listening to what I say. Anyone would think, instead of that, you were listening to sounds below—and, talking of that, it seems to me I heard some loud voice calling out an hour ago. Come, come, speak out; what is the matter?'

'There is nothing, mademoiselle, only—only the forest-keepers arrested a young gentleman close by here.'

Bernadette had vowed to say nothing to her mistress, yet she had already forgotten her fine resolution. She was not born a Gascon for nothing, and her tongue so itched that she could not help telling the truth in reply to the first question of Nicole, who exclaimed:

'A young gentleman arrested? Why?'

'Oh, M. Gujan has made a blunder. M. Gujan is the Arcachon commissary of police; he is running after the highwaymen who attacked a gambler the day before yesterday, and he is arresting everybody. He has just taken for a foot-

pad a very proper gentleman who frequently goes to the Casino—a tall, dark blade, with eyes like fiery coals.'

'How do you know he goes frequently to the Casino?'

La Cadichonne flinched a little, but it is only the first step which costs, and one admission enforcedly entails others, in the same way as all the beads on a string run off when one is removed.

'I—I saw him there the other day,' she replied. 'He was coming out, and he bowed to you as he passed by.'

'To me? Does he know me?'

'I am bound to believe so, for you answered his salutation.'

'You say a tall, dark gentleman?'

'Yes, and very good-looking. I have a notion he comes from Bordeaux, for the Parisians have no such fine figures.'

Doubtlessly the lady was of the same opinion as her maid, for this piece of information appeared to produce a very sharp impression upon her.

'What has he done to be arrested?' inquired she, after a short silence.

'I am not well aware,' faltered the maid. 'I believe there was a *battery* before our house. The commissary, who was on a round, came along with four rangers and laid hands on the poor tall gentleman. He was explaining the matter to him when I came up, and the police-officer ordered me to have a room got ready in which to question him

at his ease. I did not dare refuse, and so I came in to tell François to light up the hall.'

'Then they are there?'

'I believe so, mademoiselle. But they will not stay long. M. Gujan has sent for the gendarmes to march the young gentleman away to Arcachon.'

'The gendarmes? Is there a crime?'

'Maybe there is. It appears there have been pistols fired.'

'That is not possible. I should have heard them.'

'It all went on at the other side of the house. As your sister has her rooms on the front, she must have heard them if she were not asleep.'

'She certainly was asleep, for she would have called up the servants, and nobody stirred.'

'We all had leave to be out this evening, mademoiselle; they have only just come in.'

'But my father? Has he not come home?'

'Not yet, mademoiselle; but he can't be long. He ordered supper at twelve, and the table is set.'

'Then he will find this policeman here.'

'And he will not be glad, be sure! As likely as not he will pack M. Gujan off to finish his vile work elsewhere.'

'He would be right. Do you know nothing more?'

'No, mademoiselle,' boldly replied Bernadette, already regretting she had said so much.

'Well, leave me. I can undress alone. Go and take rest—you must be tired.'

'I am a little, it's true.'

'Then go up to your room. You need not say that you have spoken with me.'

'I shall see nobody before I go to bed. I nave had my fill of that commissary's questions.'

'So he has questioned you?'

'He questions everybody; it's his mania—but he made nothing out of me. I answered him that I hadn't seen anything, and he let me be.'

'I should hope so. Good-night!'

'Good-night, mademoiselle, and pleasant dreams!' rejoined La Cadichonne, as she went out on tiptoe.

Nicole, after having accompanied her to the room-door, shot the bolt as if to mark her intention not to meddle in this odd occurrence. It did not suit her to let Bernadette divine that the disjointed narrative which she had heard profoundly stirred her, and that she was determined to learn without further delay what was going on, and, above all, whom it concerned. The maid's description corresponded with that of a young partner of Nicole's at the Casino dances; she had not forgotten him, for he had highly pleased her.

She had so much the more easily preserved the memory of these meetings, as it was the first time she had remarked anyone among the many who had paid her court since her 'coming out' in society, where she was greatly sought for her beauty and expectations. Her father was still very wealthy, although he had always lived at a rapid rate.

This young gentleman was Aurélien Biscaros.

distinguished because he was not like all the fortune-hunters; he had charmed her by his original wit, frank bearing, and impassioned language.

She had shown herself most reserved towards him, and he had been obliged to keep on the brink of etiquette; but she felt clearly that she would love him one of these days, and, to tell the truth, she loved him already without knowing it.

Aurélien had been presented to the marquis by a Périgord friend, and M. de Briouze, very hard to please in the matter of making new acquaintances, had taken a fancy to this scion of good family, who would have cut a very fine figure among the Gascon noblemen of other days.

Nicole had also noticed that her sister did not view him with a cold eye, although he did nothing to please this fiery half-Spaniard, fatigued with adoration.

Nicole could, therefore, have a glimpse in her dreams of the possibility of a love-match, which would crown her wishes.

Aurélien had managed to tell her at the balls that he intended to spend the winter in Paris, and she heartily hoped to meet him again there.

And now upon this budding love fell like a thunderbolt the dreadful news which the Cadichonne had come to tell her.

Bernadette had not named Biscaros, but Nicole had a foreboding that it was he who was entangled in a thorny affair.

What, she could not divine. A duel—a duel in the wood, without seconds—perhaps on account of her?

Her imagination did not go beyond this conjecture, which did not approach the sad truth.

But she wished at any cost to clear up her doubts, and she did not lose an instant in executing a project conceived on learning that the prisoner was in the villa, face to face with the local chief of police.

From her suite of rooms on the upper floor a spiral staircase led to the hall where the examination was taking place.

Nicole had simply to go down and stand behind a curtain to hear it, without running any risk of being caught, as her retreat was open.

This she did as soon as she was alone, without hesitation, but not without emotion, for her heart throbbed as if to burst when, reaching the foot of the steps, she pushed the tapestry hangings a little aside which screened the hall from her.

She saw the commissary majestically enthroned in an old oaken armchair before a table, on which was scrawling the forest-keeper, who acted as clerk; the former faced the prisoner, of whom she only perceived the back.

This judicial picture, brightly lighted up by two candelabra, had the oddest effect in the billiard-room, and at first view it could not be taken as serious.

The table was near enough to Nicole's hiding-place for her not to lose a word of the dialogue.

'So,' said the police official in a surly tone, 'you persist in maintaining that you knocked several times at the doors of this villa in which we are?'

'I knocked and I called,' responded the person under examination.

'It is he!' murmured Nicole, recognising Aurélien's voice.

'How do you account for nobody hearing you?'

'I do not account for it. I am speaking the truth—that's all.'

'We require proofs. In so grave an affair, I cannot be satisfied with the statements of the accused party.'

'Of what is he accused, good heavens?' said Nicole to herself in anguish.

'You seem to forget that this is a murder,' resumed M. Gujan.

The girl felt it like a dagger to her heart. Her limbs gave way, and she had to cling to the tapestry so as not to fall.

'I know that,' replied Aurélien. 'I pursued the assassin at the peril of my life, though he did not fire at me. I failed to overtake him; but I will do everything to find him, for I feel bound to avenge my unfortunate friend.'

'These are pretty sentiments!' sneered the commissary. 'I felicitate you on expressing them, but what I want is explanation—categorical.'

'I have told you all I have to say.'

'Then the revolver which you gave up was only used by you to fire on this assassin—seen by you alone?'

'I missed him, to my great regret.'

'Yet you had two shots at him.'

'I say but one. The wretch disappeared so quickly that I was not able to send a second bullet at him.'

'How is it, then, that two chambers are empty? See for yourself,' proceeded M. Gujan, unscrewing the barrel of the six-shooter which he had laid on the table. 'Yours is a six-shot revolver, and there are only four cartridges in the chamber.'

It was true. Two of the charges were gone.

Aurélien stood puzzled for a moment. He did not any longer remember having fired at a gull before coming to the Casino.

'Write!' commanded the inquisitor to the scribe, 'write that the prisoner did not answer the question put to him.'

'I beg your pardon!' said Biscaros quickly. 'I was going to answer. Whilst strolling on the sands——'

He had no time to finish his explanation, for a door opened noisily at the other end of the hall, and a man dashed in with his hat on his head and a threatening aspect. It was one whose arrival Aurélien had dreaded. He recognised him at once, as did Nicole.

'My father!' she murmured. 'This is the death-blow! he will believe that Aurélien is guilty,

and he will forbid me seeing him any more. This misery alone was wanting!'

It was really M. de Briouze who interrupted the examination. He had just come home and learnt from his valet what was happening in his house.

He had evidently taken matters awry, for the look on his face promised nothing kindly.

Aurélien wished himself a hundred feet under ground. This untimely arrival of Nicole's father was the ruin of all his hopes.

The poor fellow did not know, however, that Nicole was at hand, hidden behind a curtain witnessing his torture.

The marquis had really a grand bearing in his irritation, and he would have intimidated loftier personages than M. Gujan.

In the first onset he took no notice of Aurélien, but marched straight up to the police-official, who rose on beholding him.

'What have you to say for yourself, monsieur?' he commenced. 'You act as if you were at home, and yet my house is not a police-station. By what right have you intruded here?'

'By the right given by the law to a magistrate in the exercise of his functions,' gravely replied M. Gujan.

'You a magistrate? You look a deal more like a bum-bailiff!'

'Monsieur!'

'And even though you were Lord High Counsellor to the highest court in the land, that would

not be sufficient grounds for your daring to take the liberty of holding your assizes in my billiard-room. I bid you be off and get through your trials out of my doors.'

Red with ire, M. Gujan was going to give way to his wrath, and it was hard to foresee how the scene would have finished if the forest-warder had not shoved in his shield.

He knew the marquis, from having once served under his orders in a cavalry regiment, and since his former captain had lived in the Periwinkles Châlet, he had never missed speaking to him when they met on the Moullo Road.

'Captain,' he struck in, saluting in a soldierly way, 'you do not know that a man has been killed at your door. There must be a statement drawn up, and M. le Commissaire could not write under the stars.'

This observation calmed M. de Briouze, who proceeded, in a gentler tone:

'My idiot of a valet never told me this. Then the men I saw out of my carriage in coming up the clearing were——'

'Two of my comrades guarding the dead man, whilst M. le Commissaire questioned the accused.'

'Where is the accused?' abruptly inquired the marquis.

Aurélien, who had remained riveted to his chair by the disagreeable surprise occasioned in him by M. de Briouze's appearance, rose bowed, and said:

'I am the accused.'

'You, monsieur! why, I know you. You were presented to me at the Casino by my old friend Caussade, my neighbour in Périgord.'

'Indeed, I had that honour.'

'And you are accused of——'

'Of murder and robbery. Yes, M. le Marquis.'

'Go to! this is absurd. You will have no trouble in justifying yourself. Adhémar de Caussade would never have introduced a malefactor to me.'

The listener breathed more freely, and Aurélien recovered hope that his meeting with the father would not have the consequences he had feared.

'M. le Commissaire,' resumed the marquis almost politely, 'I was wrong to speak to you as I did. I own that the matter is serious, and that there was urgency for the investigation; but I know M. Biscaros, and I hold him to be an honourable man. I beg you to question him before me.'

'It is irregular,' snarled M. Gujan.

'It may be so, but the case is so peculiar that I believe you can depart from the rule. To commence, I beg you to tell me who has been killed?'

'A gambler, to steal the money he won this evening at the Casino.'

'This evening? then it must have been won from me, for nobody else lost anything; and I ought to know the man.'

'It is one Gémozac, of Bordeaux.'

'A strapping fellow, built like a drum-major?

He played écarté against me, and was the chief winner. I remember, even more, that he sneaked out: he slipped away early with the spoil; but he did not take the run of luck, for the other players finished me. And you assert that M. Biscaros killed this fellow, to take a few bank-notes for a thousand francs each? Allow me to believe not an iota of it.'

At this declaration, Nicole was filled with a wild desire to fly out of her concealment and throw her arms around her father's neck for so plainly asseverating Aurélien's guiltlessness, but she was afraid of spoiling the prospect.

'Gémozac was my fellow-collegian, and I have three hundred and fifty thousand francs,' said Biscaros simply.

'A man may be rich and yet commit crimes,' retorted the commissary.

'Not such a crime,' returned M. de Briouze. 'There is no question of revenge. A man in this gentleman's position does not kill men to rob them. He might clear his path of a rival of whom he was jealous; but——'

'Who knows if he were not jealous of his friend? "Seek the woman!"' sneered M. Gujan, who had read a book or two.

This supposition made M. de Briouze frown, as fathers of eligible young ladies will do at any encounter of young men under their eaves; but it was a merely fleeting impression, and he resumed in a firm tone:

'In any case it is not the gentleman's place to prove he is innocent, but yours to prove him guilty. Was he seen to strike this Gémozac?'

'No. He shot him with this revolver, which he still held in his hand when we caught him emptying the dead man's pockets.'

'That's false!' cried out the indignant Biscaros.

'It is very unlikely, at least,' said the marquis, in his support. 'But if this gentleman despoiled the corpse, he would have the money which he took upon him.'

'So he ought, unless he got rid of it by hiding it in the wood—it is probable he so acted. We found one gold piece, which he dropped.'

'I beg your pardon! Gémozac was, indeed, carrying gold upon him—fifty or sixty louis, not more. I am used to card-play: I keep cool, and when I stand alone at écarté, I always know fairly well what my adversaries have severally won or lost. Now, I particularly observed Gémozac's play: he was the strongest punter, and I am certain that he won, above the gold, six thousand-franc notes. He put them up one after another in a huge wallet, which he spread out on the table with vanity after every "win." This Gémozac was very low "form." I felt like quizzing him upon his noisy jests, and my not making him know his place came from little wish for it to be believed that losing made me spiteful. But the murderer has not left such a well-filled pocket-book under the pines, and you will find it on searching him.'

'I hope so. It is an operation which I was about to proceed with when you arrived, and it depends on yourself to witness it.'

'I am sure that M. Biscaros can ask nothing better: for if you do not find upon him what you seek, it will be a proof of his innocence.'

'Not precisely. He might have put away the pocket-book as he did the louis, but I greatly fear the test will turn against him. What was the colour of the pocket-book which M. Gémozac showed at play?'

'Black, with steel clasps. I would recognise it among a thousand.'

'Tell me, then, if this is it?'

The speaker pointed to the top of a black morocco note-case sticking up out of the breast-pocket of Aurélien's coat, which he had not thought of buttoning up since he was arrested.

The unfortunate man had completely forgotten also that Gémozac had intrusted him on the road with this confounded pocket-book, and that he had left it in view as a piece of evidence sufficient to obtain his conviction.

If he had remembered having it upon him, he would have anticipated the question of the commissary by spontaneously handing it over to him.

Now it was too late, and he remained prostrated under the shock of this discovery; so much so that he turned dreadfully pale, and could not find a word to explain how the book came into his possession.

M. Gujan profited by his consternation to snatch the article smartly from the gaping pocket, and he presented it to the marquis, asking:

'Is it the same?'

'I believe it is,' muttered M. de Briouze, losing countenance.

'Please to open it, monsieur, to make sure. If the banknotes be in it, you will no longer doubt, I suppose.'

There they were, intermixed with visiting-cards bearing the name of 'Sobieski Gémozac.'

This was conclusive, and the nobleman ocularly interrogated Biscaros, who wore a pitiable mien.

'Do you still deny?' queried the triumphant official. 'Are you going to tell us that you found this property on the Moullo Road?'

'No, monsieur,' coldly responded Aurélien, become again master of himself. 'Gémozac handed it to me before leaving me. He feared being set upon in the Forest, and as I was going straight back to the Grand Hotel——'

'You did not return there, for I arrested you within fifty paces of M. de Briouze's villa, three kilomètres from Arcachon.'

'I am telling you the truth. Believe what you please.'

The reply was weak, and Biscaros could read his death-warrant on the marquis's clouded face.

In her hiding-place Nicole felt like swooning away. She saw that her father was throwing up Aurélien's cause after having tried to defend it,

and she wondered if the man she loved might not be the worst of villains. But yet she hoped he would not be condemned on appearances.

It was not long before she lost that last illusion.

'Do your duty, monsieur,' said the marquis, handing the chief-constable the pocket-book. 'I no longer interest myself in the man.'

A scream of grief, followed by the dull sound of a fallen body, made all the actors in this scene turn their heads round.

'There is somebody there,' stammered the police official, pointing to the tapestry curtain.

De Briouze hurried thither, and lifted up his fainted daughter from the bottom step of the winding stairs.

He carried her in his arms to put her in the arm-chair where M. Gujan had been seated.

'Nicole! my child!' exclaimed the father, in despair, 'what has come to you?'

She opened her eyes, and murmured, as she looked at Aurélien:

'No, no! it was not he; he is innocent!'

Aurélien's face shone with a beam of joy, for he thought:

'She loves me! what matter all else?'

CHAPTER IV.

THE UNEXPECTED VINDICATION.

'CALL my servants,' said the marquis to the forest-ranger, who ran to the dining-room door.

He was saved the trouble of opening it, and was almost knocked down by Mdlle. de Briouze, who was entering.

Aurélien surmised that Dolores had come in her pride to overwhelm the lover of the half-sister whom she hated, and he believed he was ruined.

The picture was worth painting, and would have been very effective on the stage at the end of an act.

Nicole fainting in her father's arms, Biscaros in consternation, the commissary bewildered, the forest-warder frightened, and the elder daughter assuredly the least agitated of any of the other characters in this domestic drama played in private.

Twenty-three summers had added ardour to this offspring of a match between a southern Frenchman and a Spanish beauty, but she did not appear more than twenty, although her waist had begun to grow less slender, as will happen to the speedily-developed Southron.

She was tall enough to carry off a little excess of fulness, and her resplendent beauty amply redeemed this defect, if one.

She had the 'dead' warm white complexion of the women of Granada, her family's place of origin, a skin which seems gilded by the sun, lips made for kisses, and eyes of flame to tempt a saint.

Bernadette also had fine eyes, but not like Mdlle. de Briouze's, which darted lightnings and were set off by a brownish circle.

As Nicole reminded one of her father, so did Dolores recall her mother, whom her husband had wedded from love, and whose daughter had the stronger hold on him from the reminiscence of the hardly yet extinct flame in the old noble's heart.

At this moment she paid no attention to her father or sister; still less to M. Gujan and the forest-keeper.

Her first glance was for Aurélien, a penetrative glance which profoundly perturbed him, for he imagined that she came to gloat in pleasure at his awkward position, perchance even to bear witness against him; for instance, that she had not heard him knock at the door or call, as he asserted having done.

'What is the matter, father?' she inquired of the marquis, without ceasing to eye Biscaros with odd persistency.

'You can see for yourself,' curtly replied M. de Briouze; 'Nicole has fallen ill.'

'Nicole! I thought she had retired.'

At her half-sister's voice, the younger lady opened her eyes and faltered:

'It is nothing—I feel better.'

'Then be good enough to go back to your rooms,' said the marquis. 'Why did you come down? This was no place for you.'

'I heard a voice—loud speaking—I was afraid—I came down by the winding stairs. I pushed aside the curtain, and the shock choked me when I saw they had under arrest——'

'This gentleman—whom you only know from having danced with him! Really this is too much sensitiveness—and I beg you to return to your rooms.'

This was the first time in her life that their father had so severely treated an adored child, and he must have felt thoroughly convinced of the unworthiness of the man whom he had so lately believed innocent to behave so harshly.

The discovery of Gémozac's pocket-book in Aurélien's possession had made him change his opinion, and now he was ready to give the unlucky youth over to the police.

The marquis might, if hard driven, have tolerated his daughters taking interest in a stylish cavalier not of noble lineage, but he could not allow their having any care for a thief.

He promised himself to have an explanation with Nicole on this subject, but before all he wished to be freed of her company, which was in the way of Biscaros being settled with.

The unforeseen arrival of his other daughter still further complicated a strained situation, which it was urgent to cut short, for M. Gujan only waited for the departure of these untimely intruders to resume the examination.

The new-comer intimidated him, and he never thought that she might bring information. She thought of that for him.

'I can pretty well guess what is going on,' said she, 'and I——'

'There has been a crime committed under our windows,' interrupted her father, 'and I cannot understand how nobody here heard a shot fired fifty paces from the house. Were you all asleep?'

'A shot? I heard two.'

'And were not startled? did you not call?'

'What was the good? I knew that all our people were away: you gave them the evening out. There were indoors only Nicole, myself, and Carmen, my woman, who went to rest at nine o'clock. I thought that Nicole was asleep too, and I did not like to arouse her for so trifling a matter. It is not unseldom that there is gun-firing in the woods at night—poachers are not scarce, so I did not trouble myself or others.'

'I beg your pardon, mademoiselle,' inquired the commissary, 'are you quite sure of having heard *two* shots?'

'Perfectly sure,' responded Mdlle. de Briouze. 'Two shots, ten minutes apart. I did not pay any attention to the first, and I should not have stirred

if somebody had not come at almost the next instant to knock at our door. I went to the window and looked through the panes. I did not see the person who had knocked, and as the sound had ceased, I fancied I was mistaken, and returned to sit down by the table, where I looked at a fashion-paper. A little later I heard a second shot. I rose and——'

'Made up your mind to go down,' finished the marquis for Dolores.

'No, father. I did not go down until you returned in the carriage. You know *I* always see to your supper,' with a glance at Nicole. 'Your man told me that somebody had been arrested, and that you were in the billiard-room. I came in to ask what was the matter. I never expected to see Nicole here, and still less this gentleman, whom I have often met in the Casino. What is he accused of?'

'Killing a man whom you certainly would also know from having seen him at the Casino too—and on the Moullo Road—one M. Gémozac, of Bordeaux.'

'What! is he dead?'

'Murdered. His body lies in the middle of the clearing. You could see it here if you opened the window.'

'Oh, this is horrible!' said the young lady, but without any further emotion at this grim intelligence.

'It is clear,' thought Biscaros, 'that our poor

Sobieski never stood well in her good books. He was only bragging, as I strongly believed.'

'And this gentleman is suspected of having murdered him!' proceeded Mdlle. de Briouze; 'a friend of his! it is odious and silly!'

Aurélien started with joy and surprise. He had expected to be charged by Nicole's sister, but, instead of bearing against him, this presumptive enemy asserted that he was wrongly accused.

This was hard to believe; and Nicole, as much astonished as her lover, anxiously asked herself whether her elder, in taking Aurélien's part, had not some secret purpose.

The other did not stop at the indignant protest which had escaped her.

Interchanging their parts, she set to questioning the police official, who had not foreseen the intervention of this Portia.

'Monsieur,' she said to him, with that independence to which her father had been quite habituated since she was fifteen, 'I do not doubt you have serious motives for arresting an honourable gentleman who has been presented to my father, but I believe you are wrong, and you must allow me to prove as much. So—you insist on knowing if I heard two shots?'

'Yes, mademoiselle,' rejoined M. Gujan, 'because this gentleman asserts he only fired one; he says on the assassin running away — whom nobody saw.'

'I saw him! He was fleeing through the forest

towards the sandy mound rising behind the Châlet, and he disappeared behind the trees.'

'Are you sure?'

'I will swear to it.'

'Then you must also have seen the prisoner?'

'No, monsieur; and I did not see the body of the unfortunate man who was killed. I presumed the fugitive was a poacher in flight, after having fired on a hare in her form.'

'At least, you can tell me how he was dressed?'

'I had no time to study him, and the moon fell on him but dimly. Still, I fancy he wore one of those round flat caps like the *Landais bérots*.'

'You will have to repeat your statement, mademoiselle, before the judge, who will inquire into this matter,' growled M. Gujan, far from convinced, and still less satisfied.

'Whenever you like,' replied the young lady curtly.

'It is still to be explained how the prisoner was found to be possessor of Gémozac's pocket-book, full of bank-notes.'

'M. Biscaros declares that his friend handed it over to him on their parting at coming out of the Casino,' said M. de Briouze, only too ready to believe in the innocence of a gentleman introduced by another gentleman to a nobleman.

'Which his friend cannot contradict, being dead. But how does the gentleman come to be by when Gémozac receives the shot? Why did he not go directly into the town?'

'Because Gémozac did not want to go in with me,' answered Aurélien. 'I followed him without his knowledge in order to be at hand to help him if he were attacked.'

'Touching solicitude! Did you know where he was going?'

'I did not. He asserted that he was going to keep an appointment in the Forest, but did not say at what spot. I thought he was expected by—by——'

'Some woman, of course!' exclaimed the marquis. 'The Winter Villas are not far from here, and all the houses are not inhabited by respectable families. I should not be at all surprised if Gémozac were killed by a rival who was on the look-out for him.'

The gossipers on the Casino terrace would have smiled if they had heard the papa of these two bewitching girls put forth this conjecture; but Aurélien, already calling back his prejudice against Dolores, agreed with the marquis in thinking that poor Sobieski had paid with life for some obscure love-making. If he withheld from supporting the nobleman's supposition, it was because he did not see fit to dwell on the point before young ladies.

'A rival would not have taken Gémozac's gold out of his pockets,' objected the commissary.

'Surely not, if a man of any pretensions in society,' replied the marquis; 'but it is very likely that this Gémozac had been prowling round some cottage-girl, whose lover is one of the blackguards who have been haunting the woodland lately.'

'The certain point is,' concluded M. Gujan, 'that a murder has been committed, accompanied by robbery. It is not in my province to define the fate of the prisoner; I can only place him at the disposal of the bench.'

'So,' interposed Mdlle. de Briouze quickly, 'you persist in believing that M. Biscaros is guilty?'

'I do not know anything, mademoiselle, about that; but considering the charges weighing upon him, I should fail in my duty if I were to leave him free.'

'Even if I point out the real assassin to you?'

'Pointing him out is not sufficient,' replied the police official, shaking his head. 'He must be in custody, and must acknowledge the crime. Then only might I——'

'If I were to tell you that, one evening, at the Casino, I overheard this Gémozac, who did not see me, boast of having made the conquest of——'

'Hush!' interrupted the marquis. 'Remember yourself, and that Nicole is not well. It is proper to have her attended to. Will you take her away?'

Dolores shrugged her shoulders slightingly.

'Come with me, my dear child,' continued the marquis to his younger daughter.

Nicole, now recovered, blessed her father for seeming to be well-disposed towards Aurélien. Though she still mistrusted her half-sister's intentions, she was gratified by her defending the accused. But she was at the end of her powers,

and preferred rather to retire than pass longer through such cruel alternations of hope and despair.

Nicole took her father's arm as far as the door; before going out she gave Aurélien a glance, which she imbued with all her soul. It plainly said, 'I know that you are not guilty, and I shall always love you.'

The poor fellow felt a pang at the heart on seeing her depart, and yet he felt he could the better clear himself with her not by—for the presence of his beloved hampered his speaking freely of Gémozac's morality. As M. de Briouze had thought, he might indeed have been killed by some jealous foe, the lover or husband of a woman annoyed by this Don Juan of Paludate.

'You were quite right, father, to take Nicole away,' approved the elder daughter, who took the airs of a still elder woman on some occasions. 'I have to speak about things not fit for a child's ears.'

'She heard too much as it was,' muttered the marquis.

'The girl I alluded to is the one in her service.'

'Bernadette? Well?'

'This Gémozac related out aloud in the Casino that she made appointments with him in the woods after dark.'

'He lied! Bernadette is a good girl.'

'Do you fancy so? I am certain that she has a sweetheart.'

'Who intends to marry her. She does not hide that. He is a resin-gatherer of hereabouts. She is going to marry him next year.'

'Are you her father-confessor, father?'

'No! She has spoken about the lad to Nicole, who pointed him out to me one day as he passed along the road.'

'Oh, father! to think it proper for your daughter to interest herself in the flirtations of her maid! Allow me to think that you are wrong. But that is not the question. I dare say the girl looks forward to wedding this rustic—only she is not stern to the fine gentlemen who buzz around her. This Gémozac was just the Hector to please her, and he did captivate her. She was expecting him this evening. The resin-gatherer knew it; he waylaid his rival, and shot him dead.'

'Did you see this?'

'No; but it is infinitely probable, and M. le Commissaire ought to direct his search in that quarter.'

Aurélien felicitated himself upon the aid Mdlle. de Briouze brought him; but the accusation she advanced so boldly struck him as very venturesome, and he could not help taking up the defence of Nicole's faithful handmaid.

'Bernadette has nothing to blame herself for,' he remarked. 'M. Gujan knows that well.'

'I know that she came up whilst I was questioning you. She told me she was returning from Arcachon, and I believe she spoke the truth.'

'Oh,' interrupted Dolores, 'it was not she who fired the gunshot.'

'Evidently not. And I do not suppose she decoyed M. Gémozac into an ambush. She identified him from having often met him on the Moullo Road, but she was not otherwise affected when I showed her the dead body.'

'She is very cool.'

'She must have much coolness if M. Gémozac were any way dear to her, for she did not wince at seeing him dead. However, she will be summoned before the investigating judge.'

At this juncture M. de Briouze intervened to put an end to the painful scene.

He had resumed the belief that the Gascon was not guilty; but he would not admit that Bernadette was mixed up with the crime, and he began to be astonished at the inveteracy with which his daughter accused the Cadichonne.

'Monsieur,' he said to the police official, 'you will do your duty, I do not doubt, and do it conscientiously. But it is not here you can complete your inquiry, and I shall be much obliged to you if you will let it drop so far this night. I can readily understand that you may not take it on yourself to restore M. Biscaros to liberty before his innocence is demonstrated; but you are not obliged to show no respect for him, if only because of his social standing and good antecedents.'

'I shall treat him properly, I promise you.'

'Then I beg you to take him to Arcachon in my

carriage. You can step in with him, and this honest forest-guard, who once served in my regiment, will get on the box beside my coachman. To-morrow, we shall all here be at your call, I and my family and household.'

'This will do very well. But the dead body? I cannot leave it out there.'

'Your men can guard it until the gendarmes come up, which should not be long. Stay! Look there!' added the marquis, approaching the casement. 'A vehicle has stopped on the road—a hackney carriage—a gentleman alights—I can see silver lace gleam—he arrives with an escort.'

'It's the Mayor of Arcachon, perhaps, or the Justice from La Teste.'

'He is talking with your two forest-keepers, who show him the body; the gendarmes who came with him surround him; he gives them orders—and now he is coming towards the villa.'

'Yes, I see him, but I do not know him.'

No more did Aurélien divine with whom he should have to deal, but he feared nothing, because he had nothing to reproach himself for. He firmly awaited the magistrate, whoever he was, whose arrival the marquis had notified. He had not long to wait.

The dining-room door opened, and a gentleman entered whom he immediately recognised as a member of the Bordeaux bench, recently appointed deputy-judge. He was in his boyhood a com-

panion, and came from the same part of the country.

Such a one could not be hostile to Biscaros, though he could not account for this unhoped-for upholder arriving.

His name was Camille Civrac ; this very young judge was widely known in Bordeaux society, where he was much liked. But he was not a mere dummy judge, and he was as well regarded in the court-room as the drawing-room.

The marquis had remarked him at the last Casino Ball, and so had his daughters, the elder more particularly.

He saluted them with thorough ease, and, after giving his name, excused himself in neat terms for intruding in the exercise of his functions. Then. addressing the police inspector, he said :

'My dear M. Gujan, I was going into the Grand Hotel, where I am staying, when I met your messenger on the Boulevard de la Plage. They were looking for M. Sourdeval, the Investigatory Judge, who has just gone to Bordeaux. I sent him a telegram, and I shall act in his stead until his return. I know about the matter already, and I am eager to hope that the state of arrest will not be continued. The judge must decide, and, meanwhile, M. Biscaros will please follow me to Arcachon.'

'Most willingly,' said Aurélien, happy at falling into the hands of so kind a magistrate.

'I have brought two gendarmes in the car I

hired. Your two forest-rangers follow with a handbarrow to carry the corpse. The autopsy will be performed at Arcachon. To-morrow, we would like M. de Briouze and other witnesses to attend there for the regular examination.'

'You may rely on that, monsieur,' said the marquis, charmed by the courtesy of this amiable deputy-judge.

'I blame myself,' the latter added, with a bow for Mdlle. de Briouze, 'for prolonging a state of affairs painful to a lady, and I hasten to end it by taking my leave of you.'

'I thank you, monsieur,' quickly replied Mdlle. de Briouze, 'and I trust we shall meet again under less dramatic circumstances. I also trust that we shall see M. Biscaros soon again, for I do not doubt that his innocence will be speedily demonstrated.'

'I wish so as much as anyone, mademoiselle, and if I did not hope it, I should not undertake opening the inquiry, for I was his playfellow, and have remained his friend. I believe he will have the honour to see you and your daughters sooner than I, as I am going one of these days to be buried in the high-court room of Marennes, a horrid petty town, whither the Minister of Justice sends me.'

'In Périgord, where we intend finishing the season, and in Paris, whither we return next month, my house will always be open to you.'

'And your friend,' supplemented Mdlle. de Briouze.

The marquis approved his prompter with a nod, yet he inwardly considered that his daughter went a little too far in inviting Biscaros, until he was completely exculpated. After all, he said to himself, if—as he thought now—Biscaros was not guilty, he owed him reparation for having joined himself for an instant to his accusers.

Biscaros was to his liking, and he was glad to give Nicole the joy of hearing the happy turn the case was taking for the youth who appeared to interest her.

Everybody was contented, except M. Gujan.

He dared not refuse to execute the orders of a deputy of the Procureur of the Republic, but he reserved to himself the evasion of responsibility by laying before the Investigating Judge the serious charges weighing on the prisoner.

M. de Briouze had returned him the luckless Gémozac's pocket-book, and he strongly relied on using that piece of evidence to prove that the assassin, say what they might, was Biscaros.

'You overwhelm me, marquis,' said M. Civrac, enchanted at an invitation which allowed him to pay attentions, perhaps, hereafter, to the brilliant Dolores.

This wonder turned everybody's head, magistrates' included.

After having bowed to her, and once more glanced around to see if the other daughter were

indeed absent, he beckoned Aurélien to follow him.

The latter was quite content. It was fully enough to be accused before Nicole and her father.

'May our next meeting be pleasant, *messieurs!*' emphasizing the plural.

As Aurélien passed by close to her, she whispered, so as to be heard by him alone:

'Remember that *I* saved you.'

The marquis, hanging behind, watched Aurélien and those escorting him, with the thought:

'He's not the man, I'll swear. But who then did kill this Gémozac?'

CHAPTER V.

IN THE PINY WOODS.

TEN days have elapsed.

Summer is ending. The visitors to Arcachon, come for the sea-bathing, have departed with the swallows, and those who have hired the Forest villas to breathe in winter the salubrious exhalation of the resinous trees, are not yet arrived.

There is no more dancing at the Casino, and the hotels along the Strand are gradually emptying.

This is the period chosen preferentially by the visitors from Bordeaux to enjoy excursions in these delightful places, either nautical or woodland, and the Sunday trains are crammed with passengers.

Some go out in boats to see the enormous ocean waves break upon Cape Ferret; others stroll along the beach to pick up shells at the Moullo; others still hire nags and ride out to the Cazau Lake by the *Truc de la Truque*, the highest wooded hill of the country.

These merry excursionists no longer think about 'The Crime by the Periwinkles Châlet,' which had filled the local papers and even the Parisian ones for a whole week.

The regular visitors were much agitated by it, particularly because of the Briouze family, entangled by chance in the tragic event, and comment had had full swing; but the sensation had begun to calm down.

Gémozac, buried, was quickly forgotten. He had only distant relatives, and no other friend than Biscaros, who was likely to pay dearly for his fellowship with the unfortunate man.

There was general agreement in the belief that poor Sobieski had been killed by some bird of passage and rapine, who had done it to steal the money he had won at play; and everybody was satisfied to hear that Biscaros, after a week's preventive imprisonment, had been set at liberty—temporary, for he had not been released without bail.

Aurélien in a great measure owed this happy sequel of a terrible adventure to the young Deputy-Judge Camille Civrac, and he was profoundly grateful to him.

Moreover, the inquiry opened by this novice in the magistracy had shown that the accusation would not stand.

The proof resulted from the surgical examination that the bullet striking Gémozac was of a lesser calibre than that of Biscaros's revolver, and this one was found embedded in a pine-tree trunk, which Biscaros had fired at the assassin fleeing through the forest.

The order of 'no foundation for the charge' was

not yet made definite, because the judge who carried on the case after the deputy had not been enabled to clear up the mystery enveloping Gémozac's death. There must have been a guilty party; he was seeking for him, and, as long as he could not find him, he wished to remain master to re-take the prisoner released, though he almost despaired of discovering the intangible culprit.

Biscaros had not given up that hope however. It was the sole means left him clearly to demonstrate his innocence, and he had suffered too keenly by the judicial error which had almost sent him to the assizes to resign himself to the position it gave him.

This situation of a man liberated on bail is cruel, for he feels he is suspected; and for him it was the worst of torments.

He deemed it seemly to abstain from presenting himself at the Periwinkles Châlet, though the hardest of all the privations he imposed on himself was not to see Nicole de Briouze again.

It depended on himself alone as to paying a visit to her father; and, no doubt, he would have been well received, even before the results of the inquiry were published, as the daughter, who was the hostess, had told him the house was open to him.

But the unmerited misfortune suffered by him had not weakened his pride, and he preferred suffering alone to risking affront—however improbable.

He suffered all the more from his love having grown since the sad event, when he had been able to divine that Nicole de Briouze loved him.

He flattered himself that the marquis would call upon him to give him a token of interest; but he did not come, though he had not left his villa.

So the desperate Biscaros determined to quit this accursed spot for ever.

But, before going, he wished to consult a man who, better than anybody else, might inform him about Gémozac and his murderer, for this man had lived in the Forest nearly thirty years, and knew all that went on in it, and everybody there.

He was formerly a seaman who had sailed in a vessel belonging to Biscaros's father, a ship-owner.

His story was known to everybody for miles around, a story as romantic as a legend.

At the end of a year's marriage, he had lost a *Landaise* woman whom he had wedded for love; she died in giving birth to a son. This grief had turned his brain, so that he ran away from Bordeaux, taking with him his infant, into the heart of the woods bordering La Teste, where he had remained in a hut of his own unaided construction.

This son, nourished on goat's milk, had grown up there, free and strong, without receiving any other instruction than could be given by the schoolmaster of Cazau. At twenty, the military service

took him, to the great grief of Père La Chamade, who nearly died of it, and he returned after three years to the paternal roof, having paid his debt to the State.

He became a resin-gatherer, knowing no other craft, and he liked this Red Indian life, although he had tried to dwell in towns.

He was now a handsome young fellow of twenty-eight, whom all the pretty girls would have fought for had he been less wild.

The story went that he had a leaning to a maid of La Teste, but he concealed his flame, and his father would have been no wiser on this head than on others but for his telling him, a month since, that he was madly in love with Bernadette Ginestras, and meant to marry her.

Bernadette did not say nay, and she had gone into the Marquis de Briouze's service a little because his villa was not very far from the Truc, where La Chamade and his son were harboured, so that she knew where to meet him in the woods when she cared to see him.

But, like a sensible girl, Bernadette considered that she was not well enough off to set up housekeeping. She had informed her sweetheart that Mdlle. Nicole was going to Paris, and that she had decided to stay in her service until summer of the following year.

When she returned to Arcachon with her snug savings, they would see about it.

Bernadette's plan was desolation to Pierre, who

could not live without her, and who talked about following her to town, although, for lack of money, he would have to walk the way.

Thus things stood at the Peak, when, one morning, Aurélien Biscaros, who had not been out and about since his mishap, mounted his horse to go and see Father La Chamade.

He had no need to hire one of the jades plentiful at Arcachon, as he had brought from Bordeaux a nice hack of his own, which he intended to sell, though he had not yet met a purchaser. Civrac, the obliging deputy-judge, had made an offer for it.

It was the very weather one could wish for a ride, and Biscaros, after his seclusion, thoroughly enjoyed the pleasure of traversing the woods on the fresh September morning, musing on the adorable girl whom he loved.

From Arcachon to the Truc it is not a long way by the '*Garde-feu No.* 1,' in other words by the 1st Fireguard, or cutting through the woods, made to stop such fires as break out among the pines. And it is a delightful road, too.

Aurélien took but an hour at a walking-pace to reach the foot of the wooded sandy hill, where old La Chamade had 'squatted.'

He dismounted in order to relieve his horse in the ascent, rendered difficult by the shifting sands, on which one has to walk, and he began to climb, dragging him by the bridle.

Though he had come here previously, he feared

going astray in the brush, which choked the roughly-traced out road.

He was not so very sure of being well received by the hermit of the Truc de la Truque.

The old fellow, who had not seen him for many years, might not recognise the son of his old ship-master, and might refuse to answer questions of which he would not see the drift.

But the first point was to find the hut, and Aurélien had not yet met anybody of whom to ask the road.

This hidden corner of the forest is only frequented on Sundays by excursionists, and is fit for ambuscades.

Biscaros had sound reasons to distrust awkward meetings, and he thought to himself that he would be sorely put to it to defend himself, as he had, to replace his confiscated revolver, only his riding-whip.

Still he pushed on, but with caution, his eye and ear on the alert, and he often paused to look and to listen.

He had been ten minutes painfully scaling the slope of the hill, when a crackling of crushed twigs made him start.

Somebody was evidently gliding through the thicket and thrusting aside the brambles ; judging by the care he took to cover his approach, this rover might have ill intentions.

But Biscaros was not in the mood to recede before a mere appearance of danger.

He continued to advance, pulling his neighing horse along; and ere long, at a turning of the path, he almost ran up against a man, who as suddenly broke out of the underwood. A tall fellow, well built and set up, wearing the Landais costume—trousers drawn in at the waist by a red belt, a straight-cut jacket over a brown waistcost, and a blue cap after the Béarn fashion.

In his hand he held a kind of adze, which denoted his calling, a 'nicker' (*hapehot*), as the tool is locally called, with which the gashes are cut in the trees to drain the resin.

Instead of attacking Biscaros, he saluted him; and the latter, speedily set at ease, thought he should answer the politeness by asking the needed information.

'Can you tell me if I am still far from the cabin of Father La Chamade?'

'A couple of gunshots, monsieur,' the resin-gatherer answered in good French.

'Do you know if he is there at present?'

'Yes, he is, monsieur; I left him there not half an hour ago.'

'Do you know him?'

'I am his son.'

'Eh! Is this you, Pierre? Don't you remember Aurélien Biscaros?'

'Indeed I do! And I recall you now. Excuse me, M. Aurélien. It is eight long years since I saw you. You were leaving college as I went off

for the army. Since then we have both changed, but I am very glad to meet you.'

Pierre did not wear the look of being as glad as he said. He frowned, and his black eye did not exactly express gratification.

Biscaros wondered why, but he could find no answer to the self-addressed question. It was old La Chamade that he wanted to see, and he was proceeding on his road when Pierre said bluntly :

'I'm pleased to see that they have let you go.'

'Did you know I was arrested ?' asked Aurélien quickly.

'I was bound to know it, for they took me too. The gendarmes came after me in the old man's house ; they clapped the cuffs on me, and hauled me over to Arcachon. If I am not in the black-hole now, it's no fault of the judge, who opened war by giving me three days of it.'

Biscaros did not clearly understand yet, though divining that it was connected with the Gémozac murder.

'I was accused of murder and highway robbery,' continued Pierre, 'and they would have sent me to the 'sizes if I had not been able to prove that, on the evening of the deed, I sat till midnight drinking with friends in a café on the Strand Boulevard.'

Now Biscaros wholly understood. He was ignorant of Pierre's being questioned, but he remembered that Mdlle. de Briouze had pointed out

to the police commissary a resin-gatherer, whom she asserted to be the sweetheart of her sister's waiting-woman. Not having seen the lass since, Biscaros had not been able to acquire explanation of her, and he had not yet suspected that the resin-gatherer mentioned was the son of the hermit of the Peak.

'Not that I should have cared if they had only accused me,' pursued Pierre La Chamade bitterly; 'but they also accused an honest lass.'

'Bernadette?' queried Biscaros.

'Yes, Bernadette—my intended bride. She had no trouble to clear herself; but it is rough, all the same, when one has nothing to be blamed for, to be suspected of abominable deeds. If I knew who denounced her, I'd make it a lively half-hour for him.'

'Does he suspect me?' inwardly inquired Biscaros. 'I know,' he answered aloud, without having much reflected.

'Then name the rascal to me!' cried the resin-gatherer.

'What's the good? Justice has acknowledged that it was a slander.'

'That makes no odds. Tell me, I entreat you, M. Aurélien.'

'Not to you, my dear Pierre. You were not mentioned by name to the police; but the sweetheart of Bernadette was spoken of.'

'That amounts to the same thing, for I am her sweetheart.'

'I might, perhaps, tell her, and yet I believe that I had better keep quiet.'

'Good-day, M. Biscaros,' called out a woman's voice gaily.

The Cadichonne suddenly showed herself.

She had been hiding in the underwood, where she had heard everything, and she intervened at the apposite moment.

The disconcerted Aurélien remained still. He regretted having said too much, and he did not know how to get out of the quandary.

Bernadette came to his aid, saying:

'I also know who it was, but there's no need of Pierre knowing. That is why you will act properly by naming no one. That will teach him not to be inquisitive, and to have more trust in me. I do not want a suspicious husband, and I am not going to allow that he should hold examinations after the judges! That is my sort. Take me or leave me.'

As her lover made a wry face at this declaration of principles, she proceeded, laughing:

'I'll leave you to decide, M. Aurélien. I am fond of Pierre, but I know him. If I were to name the person who played us this ugly trick, he would do something silly. I will keep quiet, but I shall remember; and if there's any more speaking about us, I have the wherewithal to shut the mouth. Meanwhile, I am right to hold my tongue; isn't that true?'

'Quite right,' agreed Biscaros,

He saw clearly that Bernadette had divined that the blow came from Mdlle. de Briouze, and he strongly approved of her not pointing out to Pierre's rancour the sister of his beloved.

'Good!' exclaimed the Cadichonne. 'I was sure that you would be of my way of thinking. Now, you must know why you find me here scampering amongst the bushes with my young man. I am going to stay in Mdlle. Nicole's service until next year. Mdlle. de Briouze does not want her to keep me, but M. le Marquis said that they owed me this compensation for the disagreeable things suffered in their house. So it is settled: they'll take me away. We are all going on the day after to-morrow to the Château de Mensignac in Périgord, and we shall be in Paris in three weeks. I did not like to leave Pierre without bidding him good-bye, and yet here he is making me miserable! Oh, you men!'

'How is he making you miserable, and why?' said Biscaros.

'Because he will fancy that I am going to forget him up in town. I want to ask you if it is even a little likely? I, who have already refused three fine offers because I am engaged to him! he really deserves that I should drop him now and here. My fine gentleman is jealous! Of whom? He would be very puzzled to say. He is not willing to wait until I earn what will start us in housekeeping. Well, he'll have to wait till next year Michaelmas, or else——'

'I will wait,' said Pierre simply.

'Well and good! you must stay here with your father, who is getting old, and not think to run after me. If I meet you in Paris I shall come to the opinion that you want to spy me, and I shall scratch out your eyes; but I am easy about that, because I know that you cannot afford even to travel third-class on the railway.'

Pierre was silent, but his countenance spoke, and Biscaros plainly saw that this honest fellow was not at all resigned to endure the ordeal which Bernadette talked of imposing upon him.

'Come, come!' she smilingly said, 'give me a kiss, you great donkey! Yes, kiss your promised bride before M. Biscaros—he will be a witness of our engagement, anyway.'

The resin-gatherer could not steel his heart towards the Cadichonne. He eagerly kissed her, and on both cheeks, too, whilst about it; and she merrily pursued:

'Now it is as good as if the Mayor of La Teste had officiated. Thank you, M. Aurélien! If you had not had the good idea to come here, Pierre would be sulking at me still. Now that we are reconciled, will you let me ask you why we have not seen you at the châlet?'

'Because I feared not to be well received.'

'You have nicely deceived yourself. There has been nobody talked about but you. This very morning the marquis wondered why he had not had your visit, and the young ladies reproached

him for not having looked you up in Arcachon.'

'That's very kind of them, but——'

'But you will not be sorry to hear especially what my young mistress said. As true as I am Bernadette, she will be grieved if you go away without calling at the Châlet.'

'If I could believe so——'

'That you may! Mademoiselle tells me many things—she does not treat me like a menial—that is why I do not want to quit her, for that, and because she needs the devotedness of all who love her. A word to the wise, M. Aurélien.'

He thoroughly understood.

Bernadette wished to say that Mdlle. Nicole had an enemy in her half-sister, one all the more dangerous from her preserving a sisterly aspect, but he did not yet perceive the cause of this enmity.

He readily suspected that the elder sister was jealous, but not that she was jealous of him.

He guilelessly thought that, in spite of the harsh things said about her, she was only libelled, and that she loved her father and her honour, whatever her affection for her father's other daughter.

Aurélien had not divined, on hearing her say, 'Remember that I have saved your life,' that she wished to reveal her liking for him.

This is why he only retained one of the Cadichonne's assertions, namely, that her young mistress would be grieved at not seeing him. That

was all he longed for, and he vowed not to go away without calling at the Periwinkles.

There he would see if the marquis were still well disposed towards him, and, instead of travelling abroad, to try to forget Nicole, he would go to pass the winter in Paris if M. de Briouze again expressed the desire to receive him ; but he did not give up the hope of discovering the assassin of Gémozac, and he was eager to confer with old La Chamade, who might put him on the ruffian's track.

'Thank you, Bernadette,' said he, without trying to dissemble the gladness caused him by the information imparted upon Mdlle. Nicole's sentiments. 'I ask you to announce my visit to M. le Marquis.'

'Good!' exclaimed the maid. 'I am just going back to the house. The marquis has gone to Bordeaux. My young lady is at home, while her sister went out on horseback this morning ; I will tell Mdlle. Nicole that you will come to-morrow. Do not make it later, for you will find nobody there the day after.'

'I will certainly come to-morrow. Now for our honest La Chamade.'

'Would you like me to take you to our cabin?' inquired the resin-gatherer.

'It is useless, my dear Pierre. I have been to the Truc de la Truque, and I remember the way now. I can find it without you, and I should blame myself for preventing your accompanying Bernadette, as she is going away from you for a year.

I shall see you again before my departure, and you may command me if I can be useful to you.'

'You are very kind, M. Biscaros, but, without being too inquisitive, may I ask what you want with my father?'

'I want to know what he thinks of the affair which has cost us all three so dearly.'

'He knows no more than we, for he almost never gets out of his *goorbi*, as we used to call such shanties in Africa, except now and then at night to set traps for the foxes; and he does not bother himself about what happens in the woods. Besides, it's my idea that the deed was done by some stranger to the place who will never be caught roundabout here. Still, the old man will be very glad to see you,' concluded Pierre, who was not sorry to conduct his intended to the Periwinkles Villa, for he had many things yet to tell her, and this was the last confabulation of the season.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SOLITARY OF THE FOREST.

BISCAROS watched the lovers until they were lost to sight around a turn of the pathway.

'It's a luckier lad than I,' he mused. 'He also was accused, but he is already comforted after his misadventure. The resin-gatherers will not send him to Coventry, and his Cadichonne will not love him the less, whilst it will take time, a long time, for me to recover my place in the circle where I live. I am sure that if I were to show myself in my club at Bordeaux I should read distrust on many faces—and, whatever that honest maid says, who knows how I shall be received at the Châlet? Yet I must go. If not, Nicole will believe she is indifferent to me—and her father that I have not a clear conscience. To keep myself in the background is almost confessing I am guilty. I will go—but so long as Gémozac's slayer is not taken I will remain suspected, and there's none but old La Chamade who may help me to discover him.'

Upon this rather venturesome conclusion, Biscaros resumed clambering up the sandhill, still leading his horse by the reins.

He had made out his bearings, as seamen say, and he knew now how to find the nest of the patriarch of the resin-gatherers.

The road was not agreeable. Huge thorn-trees, hollies, and broom, bristling with prickles, barred it at every step, to say nothing of the sandy soil giving way under the foot. But these obstacles did not dishearten the Gascon, and after ten minutes' painful struggling, he finally discovered the hut he was looking for.

It was truly a *goorbi*, as Pierre had called it. Having served six months in the Chasseurs d'Afrique, he had seen the shelter of boughs constructed by the Arabs in Algeria.

La Chamade was puffing at his pipe as he sat on a stool at his cabin door; Biscaros recognised him at the first glance, though he had not seen him for four years.

Wearing a sheepskin cape, the old fellow had the aspect of a wild man, together with his hair like a porcupine's quills and his snowy beard flowing down on his chest.

He rose sharply as soon as he spied Biscaros, and he came nearer to look at him narrowly, with eyes glowing like carbuncles.

Aurélien thereupon remembered that the old man had not quite lost his wits, and passed in the country as being a bit of a wizard; so he began to regret having come to consult him.

La Chamade would doubtlessly propose to tell his fortune instead of giving information on the murder.

But there was no time now to draw back, and he accosted him by saying:

'Good-day, my honest friend? I am the son of M. Biscaros, who——'

'I know it,' interrupted the old man; 'you are his living likeness. What can I do to serve you?'

'I come to see you, in the first place,' responded Aurélien, rather abashed by this unexpected greeting. 'I should have had some trouble to find your house if I had not met Pierre a little way off.'

'Pierre?' repeated the old resin-gatherer, raising his head. 'Is it not true that he is a fine lad?'

'He was very much so before going to the regiment. Now he is splendid.'

'He resembles his mother, whom you never knew, for she died before you were born. If he had not lived, I should long ago have made a hole in Cazau Pond.'

'But he does remain beside you, and he will never leave you.'

'Nobody knows—youth must have its fling; but if he leaves me, he will return, and when I heave up anchor for the last cruise, d'ye see, he will stand by—he's sworn it to me.'

'Is he going away?' inquired Biscaros, rather surprised to learn that old La Chamade did not disapprove of his son's plans to follow Bernadette.

'He may do what he likes. I am not going to clap a stopper on his going to Paris if his heart

points thereaway. I'll lend him a hand, too, even though it takes all my savings. I haven't made a fortune by tapping the pines—no more I did a-voyaging; but in the thirty years I have been plying the climbing-pole and the adze I have eaten nothing but maize-porridge, so that I have laid up some gold pieces in the locker. Not much —but they are Pierre's. If he wants them, he can take them without waiting till I "slip my cable."'

'You are very fond of him, I know, and——'

'Fond of him! Why, for him, I'd turn pirate —I'd rob and I'd murder——'

'That's going too far,' said Biscaros, smiling.

In uttering the strange declaration, the old sailor had straightened out his tall form, bent by years—he seemed to have grown six inches.

Aurélien took heed not to accept the words as in earnest, and he admired the old salt, rejuvenated by paternal love and exalted to fanaticism.

At the same time, he saw why Pierre was preparing to join the Cadichonne in Paris, which would in no way inconvenience him.

Pierre, having the control of his father's hoard had full right to make use of it to keep near the woman he loved.

Aurélien, in his stead, would not have failed to do so.

There is no love without jealousy, and absence does not always make the heart grow fonder; and Bernadette was so pretty that Pierre would do well

not to linger at the Truc whilst she was turning the heads of the Parisians.

However, Biscaros had not come to discourse on this loving pair, and La Chamade soon reminded him that his visit had an aim.

'I like you very well, too,' he said bluntly. 'Now, we have talked enough about Pierre. Tell me what you want.'

Biscaros did not know any too well how to commence. La Chamade could not be unaware that his son had been accused of killing Gémozac, and it was not impossible that he might mistake the drift of the questions which Biscaros meant to put.

But here again the old seaman did not wait to be interrogated.

'I'll wager,' said he, 'that you come to speak about that matter over at the Periwinkles Châlet.'

'You have guessed it,' quickly answered Biscaros. 'I want to know what you think of it.'

'I think that our police commissary Gujan is an ass, and ought to be dismissed, to teach him to leave honest folk alone.'

'Agreed! But the murderer—the real murderer?'

'What about him? Do you fancy I know him?'

'Nay,' responded the visitor; 'I do not think so, for you would have pointed out the villain if you knew him.'

'Why should I point him out though?' coldly said Father La Chamade. 'It's not my duty to

play the policeman on the Moullo Road; it's the forest-rangers'—and nicely they do it!'

'Oh yes! they did not prevent a good fellow being killed by ruffians, at eleven o'clock, only a few miles from Arcachon. The gendarmes are no better, as they have arrested none but the innocent.'

'You, to begin with, and Pierre next—I know that; but the judge let you both off. Pierre does not think any more about it. Do like him, I advise you.'

'I beg your pardon! Pierre has been let off for good, whilst I—well, they can take me in charge at any time again so long as the real culprit is at large. That is why I have vowed to discover him; and I thought you could help me.'

'What a "rum" idea you've got there! I wasn't by when they knocked over the pretty swell from Bordeaux—I was here, and sleeping like a blessed saint. When the gendarmes came after my lad, on the day after the matter, I did not even know what they accused him of—no more nor him, for that matter.'

'Right! but when you did learn, did you not wonder who fired the shot?'

'Faith, no! I was right down sure it was not Pierre, and that was enough for me.'

'But if they had kept your son in gaol, would you not have hunted for the culprit?'

'I might have hunted a good bit for him, and never have found him.'

'Nevertheless, you know better than anybody all the forest denizens, for you have been dwelling here thirty years.'

'I do not know the new-comers who live in the villas.'

'Do you suppose the crime was committed by one of them?' sharply inquired Biscaros.

'I would put my hand in the fire if it turns out to be one of us. The *Landais* are hot-tempered, and they hit hard when they strike out; but they do not kill folk to rob them after.'

'Not to rob them—no. But for vengeance, or in jealousy about a woman.'

'Not a whit the more. They settle their quarrels with cudgels or hatchets, and settle in full; but they never fight unfairly. So Pierre answered the judge who accused him of having shot Gémozac on account of Bernadette.'

'And the judge owned up that he was wrong, for he set Pierre at liberty. It is still an open question as to who fired.'

'If you look to me to tell 'ee, you are on the wrong course, my friend. I don't know anything at all about it, and I care less. I even fancy that if I did know, I should not tell.'

'How's that?' muttered the stupefied Biscaros.

'Because I never meddle in other people's business. The swell is dead—so much the worse for him. I did not know him, and I am not bound to revenge him.'

'But I am! he was my fellow-collegian, and I have been accused of it.'

'You have cleared yourself. What do 'ee want more? If you are wise, you will keep quiet instead of tearing about after some rascal whom nobody has seen and who must be a long way off by this time. Let him get hung there.'

'Do you, then, no longer believe him to be one of the Parisians living in the Winter Villas?'

'I never said so.'

'You let me gather so. Indeed, that is not impossible. Gémozac boasted of conquests—some rival, or husband, or brother——'

'Rubbish! These dandies are not so terrible as all that. Besides, it appears that the money was took out of Gémozac's pouch. A swell wouldn't have done that. Hows'ever, since you force me to tell you what I think about the matter, I say it's never any good a-looking for a needle in a hay-stack. The resin-gatherers are honest, but there are tramps and loafers in the forest—no lack! and this is not the first time there has been an attack. My idea is that the assassin is a Spaniard, such as often come along here; once they capture a prize, they steal through the woods to Bayonne, cross the frontier, and we never see 'em again.'

The old seaman spoke with such sincerity that Biscaros was tempted to rank himself with him in opinion, and yet something told him that the luckless Gémozac's murderer had not theft alone for

motive, and that a woman had played a part in the tragedy.

But what woman, and what kind of part?

This he could not puzzle out; but he began to believe that the old resin-gatherer was perhaps not wrong in counselling him to give up enlightenment of the mystery.

What would he gain by pursuing an unseizable assassin? In all likelihood the judge who had 'enlarged' him on bail had no intention of revoking his decision, and even though he should defer issuing an opinion of 'no evidence forthcoming to sustain the charge,' still time would have sufficed to reinstate in public opinion a gentleman unjustly suspected.

Had not Bernadette stated that he was expected to call at the Periwinkles Châlet, where he would be very heartily welcomed? Bernadette had no interest in inventing this, and if she spoke truly, what mattered evil sayings to Aurélien?

Had he not preserved the sympathy of Camille Civrac, a grave magistrate, who would not have remained his friend if he had doubted his innocence?

Thus upheld, Biscaros might carry his head on high without any need to deliver Gémozac's slayer over to justice.

His meditation was interrupted by the voice of La Chamade, who resumed, in an almost paternal tone:

'If you'll listen to me, my son, you will not take

up police work. It won't bring you any good luck. You have no calling that way, and you'll make nothing out of it. Then, again, d'ye see, there's justice up aloft; and if they never light upon the murderer, it will be a proof that the Bordeaux swell only got what he deserved.'

This singular idea struck Biscaros, and he asked himself more earnestly whether Gémozac might not have fallen under the almost warrantable vengeance of some man he had wronged more gravely than a husband or lover can be wronged—for example, a father whose daughter he had disgraced.

He also wondered how this idea had come to the hermit of the Truc, and if he knew more than he liked to say.

However it was, Biscaros could no longer hope to draw any information from him, and he did not care to prolong a useless conference; all the less, too, because he was fretting to be alone to reflect on all he had heard.

'Thank you, my honest friend,' he observed; 'you have not much enlightened me, but I am not sorry for having come, since you have given me advice by which I shall profit. Now I must leave you.'

'Going back to Arcachon?' queried old La Chamade, looking him fairly and squarely in the eyes.

'Not straight.'

'I understand. You mean to go by way of the Winter Villas.'

'On the contrary, I feel like pushing on to the Lake of Cazau, which I have not seen this ever so long, and getting back by La Teste.'

'It will take you three hours at the least.'

'So much the better! My horse has not been out of the stable for several days, and I want to give him a tiring.'

'Aren't you afraid of getting lost?'

'No; I know the road.'

'Then, a pleasant voyage, my boy!' said the old man shortly, as, turning his back on his old ship-owner's son, he entered his hut.

Biscaros was not tempted to follow him in. He resumed leading his horse to the base of the farther slope of the hill, on this side almost sheer up and down.

There he found the Fireguard Cutting which leads to the Lake of Cazau by way of the Natus and the Courneau, two clusters of cabins occupied by the resin-gatherers, and he got up into the saddle.

He felt like galloping to refresh his head. He drove in the spurs and raced at full speed for two kilomètres, though the road was very rough. But he soon had to pull in his horse to the walking pace, in order to climb over another sandy mount almost as steep as the Truc de la Truque.

Then he could give a hearing to the thoughts suggested by his conference with Father La Chamade.

This *al fresco* dialogue had not enlightened him, but it made him view his situation under another

aspect, and at the same time it had aroused a suspicion in him.

The persistency of the old fellow to turn him from his project of seeking out the assassin seemed odd, and he was rather disposed to conclude that the old resin-gatherer knew the mysterious person and had private reasons for wishing him not to be found.

What reasons?

His son, Pierre, had proved an *alibi*, and, despite the doctrines he had so boldly set forth on the excusability of murder in certain cases, one could hardly suppose that La Chamade would have killed a man not known to him to avenge a personal injury; or yet to rob him, for his reputation for honesty was proverbial in the land. In token of which the justice who had the son arrested never deemed it his duty to interrogate the father.

He was at this point in his reflections, when the clatter of a horse furiously galloping made him raise his head.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOVER'S SHIELD.

On the summit of the mount he saw a woman in a riding-habit, upon a tall bay horse, rushing at top of its powers over the steep slope, at the risk of breaking her neck. She was riding straight at him.

Aurélien's first thought was to get out of the way, for the road was not wide, and the rash equestrian who was descending the decline at this mad gait was sure to come into collision with him if he did not leave the passage clear ; but he almost instantly understood that she had been run away with, and that she would be killed unless he intervened.

Nothing is more difficult than to stop a horse which has taken the bit in its teeth ; but Aurélien, skilful and vigorous, determined to try it.

So he bravely reined in at the middle of the road and waited, leaning out on one side with an outstretched arm to grasp the bridle at the moment when the lady should be within reach.

He had not long to wait, and his boldness succeeded.

The bay, caught by the bridle by an iron hand,

reared, but the rider kept her seat and helped to master the animal, which shot steam from its nostrils.

Then only did Biscaros recognise the elder daughter of the Marquis de Briouze. She recognised him also, but instead of thanking him for the service he had done her, she coldly said:

'Ah! is this you, monsieur? Why do you bar my road?'

'Excuse me, mademoiselle,' muttered Biscaros, quite discountenanced, 'I thought you were in danger, and I——'

'You took me for a novice in equitation. Recover from your alarm, monsieur; I have had Ralph three years under riding. He is not always quiet, but he has never got the better of me. I let him have his head, as I know no pleasure superior to that of racing down these sand-hills. My father asserts that I will break a bone, but I let him say it. I am not like my sister, who would not ride a country doctor's nag. However, I felicitate myself on having yielded to my favourite diversion, as it gives me the opportunity of speaking with you. Had you met me on a level road riding at a walk you would have doubtlessly avoided me.'

'Certainly not, mademoiselle. It was on my heart to thank you and explain——'

'I do not ask any explanations, and you owe me no gratitude; but I have reproaches to make to you, and, since I have met you, I shall keep you under fire. You have thought fit not to show your-

self at our villa since that stupid affair. You shall escort me thither: this will be your punishment.'

Aurélien could not refuse, though it cost him a pang to accompany this lady who talked so lightly of poor Gémozac's death. It was a precious occasion to learn about the greeting which awaited him at the Periwinkles, and he took care not to miss it—for he was not so very much bent, after all, upon seeing the Lake of Cazau that day.

So he hastened to wheel his horse round, and the lady did not keep him languishing. She placed herself on his right hand, and said to him bluntly:

'I know all that you have undergone. Every evening I was informed of what went on at Arcachon since that brute of a commissary took you away, and I was very happy to hear that the error was acknowledged. I was not uneasy, but it is not for nothing that justice is represented as blindfolded. When she seizes anybody they never can be sure of getting out of her clutches. I bless her you are free. Need I add that I have been examined, and did my best to defend you against a ridiculous accusation?'

'I am profoundly thankful for it, mademoiselle,' muttered Biscaros, who did not say what he thought, for he felt a dislike to her for her striving to turn aside suspicions upon Bernadette's promised husband.

'The judge did not have sense enough to draw any information from what I told him,' proceeded the young lady impudently. 'He let himself be

ensnared by the falsehoods of the sweetheart of that creature with whom my sister is bewitched. I cannot tell why I persist in believing that the resin-gatherer has the death of that Gémozac on his conscience. But the coxcomb whom he slew was not worth mourning for. He tried to get every lady into trouble, and it will come out—though rather late in the day, perhaps—why he was prowling around our house.'

Biscaros wondered if the speaker meant to hint that the unlucky Sobieski had intentions regarding Nicole, and this struck his heart like a stab. He was not at the end of his amazement, for the dark lady added :

'I should willingly pardon whomsoever it was whose pistol-shot cut that rascal's deeds and slanders short. By removing him he relieved all our sex.'

Biscaros shuddered to hear the noble young lady parade the same sentiments as old La Chamade; and, if he abstained from smartly refuting them, it was because he expected she would afford a motive for them by citing facts.

But, instead of enlarging upon the theme, she went on, with a careless manner :

'Let's change the subject. Our acquaintance commenced under circumstances which neither you nor I can forget. I trust it will not stop here. We expected a visit, but we have not received it; but I shall be hostess, as usual, in our next sojourning-place in Périgord. You might call on us there.

We are going on the day after to-morrow to spend three weeks at the Château de Mensignac, where you will be very, very welcome. Is it agreed?'

'I shall have the honour to see M. le Marquis de Briouze to-morrow at his residence,' evasively replied Aurélien.

'Oh, you want to be invited by papa? That is of no consequence, monsieur. But he will invite you, do not doubt, and by writing, too—for I warn you that you run a great risk of not finding him at home before our starting. This morning he went to Bordeaux to bid good-bye to friends, and he is not to return till to-morrow evening. You see I am the hostess for twenty-four hours—and I am not sorry to have to entertain you.'

'Is it not a dual government?' objected Biscaros merrily, 'a president and a vice-president? Mdlle. Nicole has not quitted the Periwinkles, has she?'

'What do you know about that?' interrupted the Franco-Spaniard. 'Have you seen my sister?'

'Nay, mademoiselle; it was her woman told me.'

'Ah! has that girl been taking the liberty to run about after you in Arcachon?'

'I met her in going through the woods.'

'And she had the impudence to address you? Come, come; decidedly we must not keep in our service a hussy who passes half her time scampering up hill and down dale. I shall ask papa to send her away. Nicole will have to learn to do without, or have another of a different sort, or

share my own woman's services. However, this Cadichonne has well informed you. My sister has remained at the Châlet, but I might as well be all alone, for we never see one another when our father is absent. She has her own rooms, of course, and she never sets foot in mine, though on the same story, but at the other end of the villa.'

Biscaros was so little interested in the architectural plan of the Châlet and the family arrangements that he almost blushed for Mdlle. de Briouze—who never blushed for anything—going into such detail. To avoid an answer which might elicit more, he said:

'I was ignorant that your sister lived so apart.'

'We are half-sisters only,' said the dark lady emphatically. 'She detests me, and I own that I am not over-fond of her. Still, we sit at the same table, and we wear a pleasant society-face for each other. It is the rule. All novels will tell you that half-sisters never did agree. Yet I vow to you that I only wish Nicole well, and it is no fault of mine that we are not on good terms. She has a peculiar temper—hard to please, and the worst is that she delights in the company of her inferiors. That is how she comes to be attached to this Bernadette, a hypocritical vixen, who will get her into some disgrace, mark you! I fear she has done so already, for in the "visitors' colony" there have been many comments on this ridiculous

fellow's death. People wonder what brought him out at night near our Châlet.'

Aurélien frowned so plainly that the speaker saw she was going too far, and hastened to add:

'I would not for the world assert that dear Nicole attracted him thither, but ugly rumours are afloat, and if my father does not put a check on the thoughtless acts of the foolish young thing, heaven knows what will be the result.'

This was a regular accusation which the lovely Dolores formulated against the fair Nicole, who was not at hand to defend herself. Aurélien did not mean to credit these perfidious insinuations, and yet they thrilled him to the bottom of his soul.

'Slander! some of the mud will stick!' wrote Beaumarchais in 'The Barber of Seville,' we know.

Aurélien already doubted his beloved.

'Fortunately we are going away,' resumed the lady, 'quitting a land I could curse—if we had not made some pleasant acquaintances here—such as you, monsieur, who are now included among our friends.'

Biscaros received this blunt compliment without blenching, and the dark young lady continued:

'And more fortunately still, Nicole will be married this winter.'

'Married! this winter!' repeated Aurélien, falling out of the skies.

'Yes, we have pretty well arranged it. The

alliance suits papa, and I approve it with all my heart. Nicole's formal consent is alone wanting. Like all us young girls, she is in no hurry to don the fetters; and the bad advice that Bernadette has given her has frightened her. But she will never commit the folly of rejecting a nobleman who is strongly in love with her, and very friendly with papa.'

A blow from a sledge-hammer on the head would not have more soundly stunned poor Aurélien than this unanticipated news.

'You shall see him soon, if, as I hope, you will do us the honour to come on to Mensignac. Papa will introduce you, and I am certain he will much please you, as he is the very cream of society.'

'Is she poking fun at me?' thought the still confused Gascon.

'He is the Viscount Fernand de Saint-Osvin.'

Biscaros started. He was sure he had recently heard this name uttered, but he no longer remembered on what occasion.

Suddenly memory returned.

'He is still young,' continued the lady, 'since he is only five-and-thirty; he is very handsome, rich, and a viscount. All our friends know him, and think highly of him. Nicole can never find a better.'

'I remember now,' said Biscaros to himself. 'Why, they said that this Saint-Osvin was courting the dark one. Is she tired of him, and would she for spite discard him and burden her sister with him? This is infamous!'

There was foundation for indignation; but Biscaros did not yet perceive the plot hidden by this impudent declaration.

The gossips on the terrace had spoken of the Viscount de Saint-Osvin as a spendthrift who had a hold upon Mdlle. de Briouze, and perhaps extracted money from her, or her father.

Such a connection would be a dangerous one. She might naturally have had enough of it, and be weary of suffering the extortions of this society swindler; but far more surprising was her project of marrying him to even a half-sister.

Yet she asserted that the marquis approved of this odious alliance! She even dared to pretend that Nicole was not repugnant to it!

Of what fine clay, or rather mud, were all these noble characters moulded!

This Franco-Spaniard was not worth the Cadichonne, who openly loved a man of her caste. This father, who seemed led by the nose by a termagant daughter, and thrust his other child into the arms of a titled scamp, was not as good as the old resin-gatherer, La Chamade, who boasted of being ready to commit a crime for love of his son.

And Nicole lending herself to the accomplishment of the shameful designs of her hated half-sister! Nicole, the angelic, who had let Aurélien believe that she loved him, obeyed without revolt the wishes of this demon! Was she ignorant that M. de Saint-Osvin had paid his addresses to her half-sister? This might be supposed, but it was

not ample excuse, and Aurélien wondered if Dolores were not lying in saying that Nicole was resigned to accept the proposed suitor. Yet, if the viscount were courting the elder daughter, who had a separate fortune beside her filial expectations, why should he turn to the younger, who had only the latter prospect? This he could not divine.

Might not the quidnuncs at the Arcachon Casino have calumniated Mdlle. de Briouze when they prated aloud of her relations with this Saint-Osvin as a fact known to everybody?

Had she also been the idol of Gémozac? Was she on the look-out to replace him or them?

Aurélien did not suspect it, and yet one would have taken him for the dullest of men not to comprehend the lovely Dolores' desire.

The dark eyes should have told him enough; for she had an eloquent glance, and she had taken care to use them in emphasis to her significant words, after the police commissary's examination whispered to Biscaros: 'Remember that *I* saved you.'

But lovers only see and hear their beloved, and Biscaros was madly enamoured of Nicole de Briouze.

'The wedding will take place in town, where, I trust, you will be present,' imperturbably concluded she. 'But do you not agree with me that, of all the paces, walking is the most tiresome, because it is the slowest? Shall we have a bit of a gallop?'

Without waiting for his reply, the ardent woman spurred her horse into darting off at full speed.

It was a capital chance to let her go, but the Gascon did not profit by it, firstly because he had information yet to elicit about Nicole from her sister, and, again, from his self-conceit as an equestrian.

He did not like to seem daunted by the obstacles of every kind which she took with rare intrepidity. With loose reins, she ran down the sharpest steeps, and with a high hand cleared the fallen trees blocking the road sometimes.

It was justly due to her to say that she rode marvellously and feared nothing.

Biscaros, who was not more timid, and had a steady seat, could not do less than follow her, if only to lend a helping hand in case of accident.

Whither was she speeding at this frantic pace?

Instead of keeping on the Winter Villas road, she suddenly turned into a stony path, with jutting-up boulders, deep ravines, and many thorn-bushes for obstructions.

Away she went, bending over on the horse's neck, without heeding the pebbles which he flung up, or the briars which rent her skirt.

Biscaros did his best to overtake her, but his Irish hack was not in condition to vie with the half-bred ridden by the dashing Dolores, and he was not slow to lose sight of her.

When he caught up with her, it was at the base

of a hill, which he had had much difficulty in surmounting, and more to scramble down. She was seated on a mossy rock, with her bay beside her panting, its reins upon its neck.

Here was what is seldom met with near Arcachon : a pile of stones over a spring. Very old but hale oaks surrounded an arena carpeted with heather, and tall, silver birches stood up like phantoms in the distant vistas of the forest.

The lady evidently knew this spot previously—wonderfully meet for a romance ; and she may not have come here unintentionally.

During her headlong race her sable hair had become unplaited, her pale cheeks were tinted with pink, and her eyes glittered.

She looked superb in her habit, and she lashed her truly Spanish feet with the tip of the whip in her black-gloved hands.

'You frighten one,' said Aurélien, hastening to alight. 'It is a miracle your horse did not lose footing on that break-neck road. Why do you thus risk your life ?'

'I wished to see if you would risk yours to follow me. My motto is : "Who loves me, follows me!" and you have followed me,' added Dolores, looking steadily at Biscaros.

He lowered his eyes without taking up the thinly-veiled challenge, and she proceeded :

'It appears that your motto is not the same.'

If this woman had not been so near akin to the one he loved, he would have cut short so thorny

a situation; but, as it was, he sought some means to extricate himself without exciting warfare.

'We have not the same feelings,' continued Dolores. 'I am sorry, but I am not astonished. Nobody ever cares for me.'

As Aurélien slightly shook his head in polite rebuke, she proceeded:

'None, monsieur, unless my mother, who died early in my life. My father gives me my way out of love for her, and a kind of fear, and my sister acts as if I were a mere ornament in the house. Ah! she is more fortunate than I. She is going to marry the man who adores her, whilst I—I learn that life is nothing without love, and love nothing without the beloved one seeing what worship he inspires. Ah!'

The language was only too clear. There was only the name of 'the beloved' missing, and Aurélien could now guess it. But he did not reply, as he only wished he were a hundred miles away from what looked like a trap laid by Dolores.

Yet he felt that to disdain this indelicate advance was to insult her beyond forgiveness.

Happily she mistook the cause of his silence. She thought she had frightened one who was not a wearer of a title by her lofty carriage, and she hastened to add:

'No one loves me, I say, and no one understands me. My father is persuaded that I have deferred marriage, even to letting Nicole marry before I do, because I would not be content with less than a

count or a duke. He is wrong. I come of a race as noble as his, and I am satisfied with that as far as rank goes. Oh, I have more than once envied the fate of the petty workgirls, whom I have seen from our Parisian mansion windows stroll by on their sweethearts' arms—poor as themselves. They have no stern fathers; they are not obliged to account for their actions to society; and they can go wherever their hearts lead them. I have even envied our Bernadette, who chose her lover amongst the pines of Arcachon Forest because he pleased her. This resin-gatherer may be an assassin or a robber, but what does that matter? The object of my love might commit all crimes, and yet I should love him. Do you understand such a mood as mine?'

He understood it only too well; and as she took him to be, or pretended to take him for Gémozac's murderer, he began to pity her for this craving for a notoriety of gallows-fame as an ailment, not a passion.

The 'Remember, *I* saved you,' was an entreaty or a threat, for it might imply: 'If you scorn me, I shall denounce you.'

The delicate situation became a tragic one.

This mad creature began to alarm him—not for himself, as he was innocent of the murder, but for Nicole.

He caught a glimpse of a plot hatched by Dolores against her half-sister, and he thought that Bernadette had reason for saying that Nicole

might soon have need of the help of all who loved her.

The dark-eyed one filled him with horror, for her heart was not in her sentimental verbiage.

There she sat in a languid attitude, her face aflame, her lips parted, and her eyes kindled.

'You are silent,' she resumed slowly. 'Have you nothing to say?'

This was too much, and Biscaros was about to speak out plainly at the risk of making a mortal enemy, when chance came to his succour.

A sound of approaching voices struck his ears.

'There's somebody coming that way,' he said, pointing to a road running into the clearing, another than that they arrived by.

She sprang up and listened.

The voices were no longer heard, but distinctly came the rattling of horses' hoofs, stumbling on a stony road.

No doubt some tourists exploring the Forest.

The lady probably wished their stumbling would break their necks, for she frowned and ground her teeth; but she very soon recovered mastery of herself.

'It is useless to have them find us here,' she remarked, with a coolness which clearly proved that she had not lost her wits during a single instant. 'It is also useless for you to accompany me home. Help me remount, and return to Arcachon.'

Happy at getting out of it so cheaply, Biscaros hastened to obey.

He held out his hand for Mdlle. de Briouze's little foot, and she sprang up on the saddle with the lightness of a consummate horsewoman; he handed her the reins, and did not take advantage of the opportunity even to press the tips of her fingers. He was but twenty-five, and he feared being burnt by the contact.

'We shall be at Mensignac two evenings hence. Do not forget that we expect you,' she said, waving her hand to him with very much that gesture which expedites the blowing of a kiss.

With a smart cut of the whip she lifted the bay, to get him out upon the wretched road she had already travelled.

CHAPTER VIII.

D'ARTAGNAN TO THE RESCUE!

It was high time the lady disappeared, for, almost instantly, the providential cavalcade emerged from the woods.

It was a merry troop from Bordeaux, out for a holiday, perched upon hired horses, and shouting out jokes at a key audible a quarter of a league away. They had three ladies among them who were very well known at the Comédie Café and the promenades of Tourny.

Biscaros, who had not lived as an anchorite, had sometimes supped in their company. It followed that they hailed him as soon as they spied him, and one of the party having been a boon companion, he was quickly surrounded.

He had to reply to questions more or less embarrassing. He was asked what he was doing there, and one of the ladies began to jest with him about the death of Gémozac, who had in his lifetime enjoyed some notoriety in the byways of Bordeaux society.

The men thereupon eyed him askaut, and his

former companion showed less eagerness about renewing acquaintance.

Biscaros grasped this pretext to cut the painful colloquies short. He purely and simply turned his back on his fellow-citizens, who decided on going their way without any reluctance.

The whole troop went away by the same path as the daughter of the marquis had used, leaving Aurélien to reflections not merry.

This awkward meeting offered a foretaste to the reception he would have at Bordeaux when he reappeared there.

The opinion of these third-class merrymakers little mattered to him; but his old friends would not perhaps wear a sweeter face; and, in the doubt, he vowed to shake the dust off his shoes on his native town, as the saying goes, where they showed themselves more severe than the magistrate who had released him.

Still, he did not bear any grudge to those who had enlightened him on that point, and delivered him in a manner so timely of the dark-eyed Dolores.

He let them get afar before he remounted, and he rode off on the other side, fully resolved to follow the last advice of the lady, namely, to proceed directly to Arcachon. As for the visit to Mensignac Château, that was another matter.

On quitting Bernadette at the base of the Truc, Aurélien had decided to accept an invitation which allowed him to see Nicole again, and come to her

aid. Now he hesitated. He was afraid of her sister, and mainly of ridicule. The attack he had undergone might be renewed. And he lacked the vocation to play Joseph.

If he kept up that character, the wrath of the woman scorned would fall upon Nicole. What would he do, moreover, in the country-house where he would doubtlessly meet Nicole's intended? He surely would gladly 'meet,' in another sense, this tarnished nobleman, if he managed to acquire certainty of his being a confederate of Mdlle. de Briouze. But would Nicole help him to unmask her half-sister?

Would she have enough energy to resist the pair, with her father's blind assistance? Did she love Biscaros, at least? Bernadette averred so, but what proofs had he?—the Cadichonne might be deceived.

Aurélien might have questioned if Dolores had not lied in speaking of her half-sister's marriage as a settled thing. But it had not come into his head to doubt her altogether.

The more he pondered over the incidents of this momentous morning, the more he was inclined to believe that he would act wisely in returning to his first project, to wit, to spend a year abroad.

He had put his steed to the trot as soon as he was on the straight road, and he was not long coming out on the Strand Boulevard, which is to Arcachon what the Boulevard des Italiens is to Paris, or Piccadilly to London.

At the most frequented part of the long way stands the Grand Hotel, where he still kept his rooms, from fear that a change of lodgings would be taken for a running-away.

He alighted at the edge of the doorsteps, gave his horse to an ostler, and quickly went in to make his preparations for departure. He meant to be off that same evening for Paris, and thence to Switzerland.

At the hotel office he was given a small packet and a letter, which he carried up to his room, and unsealed without hurrying, as he expected no interesting tidings. He was highly surprised to see that the letter was from the marquis, who wrote :

'MONSIEUR,

'None can have been more gratified than I to hear of the happy issue of your disagreeable adventure, and I hope you will forgive my having for one instant doubted that it would terminate well. To prove to me that you have not preserved a bad remembrance of the sad moments passed at the Periwinkles Villa, will you accept for a few days the hospitality which I shall be delighted to offer you at Mensignac? You will find at Périgord our mutual friend Adhémar de Caussade, who undertakes to bring you out to the Château. It is agreed, is it not? We all expect you.

'Yours most devotedly,

'HENRI DE BRIOUZE.'

After reading it, Biscaros could no longer doubt the writer's goodwill, but one single line from his younger daughter would have touched him much more.

He tossed the note on the table, not meaning to answer it, and negligently untied the little parcel, wrapped in tissue-paper.

To his great surprise, he found it was ivory-covered tablets—one of those miniature books of dancing engagement cards in which young ladies insert the names of partners over against the dances—sometimes merely initials, sometimes fanciful names for disguise or jest, or from ignorance of the real one.

This memorandum-book, marked with the initials 'N. B.,' belonged to Nicole de Briouze. Aurélien opened it with unspeakable emotion, and he read, at the top of a page, a name and a date:

'19*th July*—D'ARTAGNAN.'

Aurélien had not forgotten this date; it was that of an evening party at the Casino, where he had, for the first time, asked out Nicole, who had not known him previously, and who had written in her tablets 'D'Artagnan,' because she fancied that the young man resembled the most winsome of Dumas' 'Musketeers.'

Later on, at the foot of the same page, she had added these three words, dated that very morning:

'11*th September*.—Come, save me!'

Aurélien nearly choked with gladness. Nicole called him to her succour! She loved him from thus applying to him! In a second he forgot the dangerous Dolores, and he called out as though the maiden in distress could hear him:

'Here I am! I am coming!'

The die was cast. Come what might, Aurélien would go to the Château de Mensignac.

Had he been able to read the future, perhaps he would have shrunk back.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DUBIOUS DICE.

In those days Périgueux was only a minor town, but its like was not to be found in all the provinces of France, not even in the southern ones, where they so delight on pleasure-making.

There is almost as much amusement in Périgueux as in Paris—due proportion regarded, of course. As much luxury is not displayed ; the Tourny promenade cannot vie with that of the Bois de Boulogne, and, as the *boulevardiers* would say, ' there is a scarcity of lively women '—meaning the reprehensible sort ; for society includes many lively and lovely belles.

Revelry goes on with unparalleled gusto. There are dinners, abundantly truffled and copiously washed down with wine ; choice suppers with the actresses of companies on tour ; and heavy card-play at the wine-rooms and elsewhere.

Baccarat may have been born at Agen ; it has grown at Périgueux, whence it was imported to Paris some fifty years ago.

In this blithe *departement* of La Dordogne—where

Rabelais ought to have seen the light, and which would have pleased the adventurer Casanova, who was a dealer at faro in Venice—nobody thought then but of a short life and a merry one.

At the foot as at the top of the social ladder, the table was the main thing—the gaming and the dining table.

An old saw says that the Gascon comes into the world with a sword in one hand and a card in the other. So with the *Périgordians*, with a fork in addition.

Here may be seen what is never seen in Brittany or Normandy, where they drink hard, too—peasants in the street on market-days *punting* against open-air banks, and bravely losing the value of a cow or pig sold on the fair-ground.

Since the War all has changed. However, the high-livers of Périgord have always had serious merits. Their land is a plantation of great men, in token of which they do not know where to find a site for a statue.

All their public places have one, from Montaigne's to Marshal Bugeaud's.

Biscaros had often enough been in Périgueux. He had friends there, and, as he did not shun gaming, he had already been admitted into the most-frequented club in the town, the Philologie, why so called none know, for it never has busied itself about *belles lettres*.

It is the local Jockey Club, the trysting-place of all the squires and gentry roundabout, who are

not proud, and willingly rub elbows with the rich townsmen.

The fusion takes place around the board of green cloth, and Biscaros made the acquaintance here of M. de Caussade, who had, subsequently, at the Casino of Arcachon, presented him to the Marquis de Briouze.

This time it was not to tempt fortune at baccarat that Biscaros put up at the Hôtel de France, celebrated throughout the whole gastronomical universe for the excellence of its *terrines aux truffes*.

Biscaros was hastening to the rescue of Mdlle. Nicole, who had called him in a manner as ingenious as touching, by sending him the ball-room memo.-book, the keepsake of their earliest meeting.

The amorous Aurélien had only stayed twenty-four hours at Bordeaux to settle accounts with his banker, and draw enough cash to pass the winter in Paris, whither he intended to proceed direct on quitting Périgord.

Officially he would arrive to answer M. de Briouze's invitation, but really it was solely to see Nicole again and uphold her. This decided him to incur again the impassioned ogling of Mdlle. de Briouze.

Before showing himself at the Château, he wanted to learn how matters stood from M. de Caussade, who was to conduct him thither.

This gentleman lived in town for want of being lord of the manor with a manor, as that of his ancestors had been sold, house and land, to pay

the debts of a wild youth; but M. de Caussade was none the worse for that.

He had enough to live upon, and he led an agreeable life—cherished by the dowagers on account of his stylish ways, and doted on by young bloods on account of his gaiety and wit. He had remained, contrary to the saying, 'a prophet in his own country.'

Under the patronage of this amiable person, Biscaros was sure of being well received on his return into this society, which he had badly neglected for a couple of years.

He therefore busied himself in seeking out his introductor—not a very easy task, as Adhémar de Caussade dined out nearly every day. But he regularly ended his evening, if not the night, at the Philologie, where Biscaros deemed it as well to go, about ten o'clock, to find him.

He therefore leisurely did honour to the plenteous repast served up at the hotel, and at a quarter to ten sauntered, smoking his cigar, towards the club, which was at no great distance.

He belonged to it as a country member, and, consequently, had the right to enter without any ceremony, and he went up the stairs.

He did not see the gentleman he was looking for; but there was a goodly company, more numerous than he had expected.

Gaming was in full activity. Thirty players, sitting or standing, surrounded a long table.

On approaching, Aurélien received nods, which

denoted that no coolness existed, although his adventure at Arcachon must have been known here.

There were several fresh faces for him; amongst others, the banker, a still young man of very showy appearance, but his countenance displeased him. This character was what is called a lady-killer—too fair, with features too regular; he had disquieting eyes, which never looked a man in the face. Very fashionable, though, and of irreproachable correctness in manners—a character produced scarcely ever in Gascony.

Not remembering him here, Biscaros thought he came from Paris. He was rather surprised that the play was going on without cards.

It was probably in honour of the new-comer that baccarat had been momentarily suspended in favour of *le creps*, or 'crabs,' a game played with a pair of dice, known to Biscaros from practice at it in Bordeaux, where it used to be in fashion.

Before the stranger lay a handsome sum in gold and notes. Each thrower, in turn, took up the box and threw the bones, which the banker, after paying or raking in the stakes, as the case might be, picked up and put in the box, he alone having that right, though none to shake or throw them.

A born gamester, Biscaros could not fail to become interested in the game. It ran on with varying luck, until finally it set in to the banker's profit. A stake would pass two or three times, and, as almost all those playing on his hand would

double their stakes, the settling-cast would be always the most important. Biscaros invariably lost this, almost always by throwing deuce-ace, the fatal points which made the bank win.

'Deuce take it!' exclaimed a country squire, seeing his gold raked away. 'These devil's bones are bewitched. My dear fellow,' he added to Aurélien, whom he had long known, 'you ought to take the box. It will change the run.'

'Willingly,' replied Biscaros, who never retreated in play or in other matters, 'if these gentlemen will allow it.'

The banker bowed in token of assent, the players said 'Yes' in chorus, and Aurélien, having laid a hundred-franc note on the board, received the dice-box from the last loser. The banker dropped the dice into it, and Aurélien rolled out a winning combination; and so a second and third winning throw.

The fair stranger paid all with perfect good grace, and the tripled mass formed a heavy pool.

'This is the "go" we always lose. I am only going to leave down my prime stake,' observed Biscaros, drawing out thirty-five louis.

The others were less prudent, and let all stand.

Without uttering a single word, the banker covered the two ivory cubes with his long white hand, lifted them up smartly, and let them fall into the box presented by Biscaros.

'Rattle them up well, and throw them out hard,'

cried out one of the contestants; 'that's the only way to get a good one.'

Aurélien conformed with this injunction, so that one of the vigorously-hurled dice, after striking a snuffbox put on the table as a talisman by some superstitious player, fell back on the cloth and rolled over upon the floor.

The other die, which had not left the board, marked 'ace.'

'It is a misthrow,' said one of the players.

'I beg your pardon, gentlemen,' coolly replied the banker, 'the rule says that all dice *upon the board* must count. I beg the gentleman who threw to pick up the die fallen off the board, and replace it in the box for another cast, in order to complete the point.'

Indeed, such is the rule, and nobody demurred.

'Never mind,' muttered Biscaros, stooping down. 'Eh! This other shows an ace, too! And two aces are the losing point. We had a narrow escape. But, clearly, these dice have a confirmed habit of always showing the same face.'

As he spoke, he threw up, in his hand for a box, the die he had picked up, and threw it over and over again upon the table.

'Aces all the time!' he exclaimed. 'How odd!'

This observation cast a damper on the gathering.

'They are the club dice,' said the banker. 'They had better be changed.'

'Changing will not do,' returned Biscaros; 'they

must be tested, for I suspect they have been "doctored."'

'I do not suppose that you suspect me of having introduced them into the club?' haughtily queried the wearer of the light whiskers.

'I'll begin the testing operation by taking them into custody of the court,' responded Biscaros, clapping them into his pocket.

'The only way is to saw them in halves to see if they are loaded,' said a knowing player.

'The throw is "no go,"' added a loser.

'Quite so, gentlemen,' went on the imperturbable banker. 'The throw is not counted, and stakes can be drawn out.'

There was no pressing required for the very much-endangered stakes to be withdrawn, but some inveterate gamblers called out:

'This is no reason to stop playing.'

'I am under your orders, gentlemen; only, no more dicing. If you like, I will set up a bank at baccarat.'

To believe that this ugly episode cooled the gamesters' ardour, is to show that the Gascon's nature is ill understood.

Rather than go away to rest so early, they would play marbles like children, or match-pennies like soldiers.

The proposition was accepted with unanimity and enthusiasm, save by Aurélien, who began to be aware that nobody supported him.

'Will somebody kindly ring for cards?' resumed

the banker. 'I hope nobody will say that they have been prepared. As for the dice, which this gentleman has seen fit to put in his pocket, if he will take the trouble to bring them here to-morrow evening—whether they are true or false—I shall be delighted to bring him into connection with two of my friends. I shall spend the whole of to-morrow in the country, but I shall come back to Périgord about eleven o'clock, and this gentleman will lose nothing by the delay.'

This was said with an assurance which disconcerted Biscaros, and in a bantering tone which cut him to the quick. He abstained from retorting by mere sharp quip to this thinly-disguised challenge, because he did not care to engage in a quarrel with a stranger in a club where he was only on a passing visit.

Besides, he saw most plainly that he was taken for a spoil-sport, a dog in the manger; what is called, in boulevard slang, a man who cannot dance, and will not let others have a fling.

These Périgordians would rather run the risk of being cheated at play than side with a stranger who prevented the pastime.

Biscaros had self-command enough to answer:

'Very well, monsieur. To-morrow evening my seconds will arrange with yours. I am going to hand these dice over to the club-manager to be examined by an expert.'

'Yes, yes; an inquiry—that will do——'

'Oh, we are losing time!'

'How much is the bank?'

These exclamations arose from all sides, so that Biscaros, 'dropped' by everybody, turned his back on the play-maddened group, and went away from the table as displeased with himself as them.

He had missed his aim, and committed a blunder; for, all things considered, he was not sure of his ground.

Perhaps the dice were good, and even if they were loaded, the fraud might not be imputable to the banker. These confounded instruments of mischief had not always turned up aces, and to substitute false ones for the true under numerous eyes required this displeasing person to be a pupil of Robert Houdin, the prestidigitateur.

Moreover, he appeared to enjoy a reputation in Périgord which sheltered him from suspicion, and he must have felt strong in his position and by his good fame to meet an accusation of trickery with such disdainful indifference.

Whence came he? Who was he? Biscaros had not the faintest idea, and there was no one by of whom he could gain information. The players were very busy in shuffling the cards which had been brought them, and he did not like to question one of the club servants. He made up his mind to wait for M. de Caussade, who could not be much longer, and he went into the reading-room to see if he were not there.

He had the happiness to find him reading a newspaper, and alone.

Adhémar de Caussade was a gentleman in his fiftieth year, who appeared younger. He had a lofty manner, from his physiognomy being grave, and his stature about six feet. He would have cut a fine figure in the Court of Louis XIV., and one could easily picture him as they dressed in the King Sun's reign. He would have handsomely carried off the long-skirted coat, the embroidered waistcoat, and the full-bottomed peruke of Versailles; but, in spite of his imposing appearance, he was the pleasantest boon companion imaginable, and our own attire became him very well also.

At Bordeaux, where he rather often went, he had taken a liking to Biscaros. Having fought many duels, and broken many hearts in his youth, he saw himself again in the person of this gallant, who pleased the softer sex and feared nothing.

As soon as he perceived him, he rose, opened his arms to him, and called out, as he gave him a greeting:

'At last, you have come! I am delighted to see you, and I have a quantity of things to talk to you about. Come and sit by me in a corner where we can chat.'

He drew him away in a friendly manner to a lounge at the back of the room.

Keenly touched by this welcome, which he might have doubted to receive before he saw his old friend, Aurélien did not think of questioning him to commence a conversation. He would have plenty of time to learn about the man with the

suspicious dice, and he first wanted to know how M. de Caussade looked on the Châlet matter.

'You have heard about my sad adventure?' he said; 'and I hope you did not judge me unfavourably.'

'I know it as well as if I had stood by,' interrupted Caussade. 'Briouze has completely informed me. Like him, I am certain that you have been victim to a chain of fatalities, and you have become all the more dear to me by the same. In some degree, misfortune does good, for by that sorry story you have won the sympathy of the ladies at Mensignac. Father and daughters are impatiently awaiting you, and I am charged to bring you to them.'

'I know so. The Marquis de Briouze wrote me to that effect.'

'To-morrow there will be a wild-boar hunt, and we shall find nobody at the house, unless there may be the second daughter. The other is a tomboy, you may know, and she intends being in the hunt. As we say nowadays, she's a dead shot; but you are invited, and nothing prevents us going to join them to-morrow morning at the sportsmen's meet.'

'The deuce! I did not foresee this!'

'That there would be hunting? and so you have not brought your shooting togs and gun? That makes no odds. I have all you want to arm you and equip you from head to foot. My nephew is about your build, and he left me with all his

trappings. We will have a whole day's hunting, and get back to Mensignac by dinner-time, where we will have left our evening-dress on the way by; and you can stay a few days there, if you like it. Your rooms are ready. I will have to get back to Périgord to sleep.'

'I shall return with you.'

'Why? Briouze reckons on keeping you all the week; and I assure you that you will not be at all in the way. There is room enough in the house to lodge a dozen guests.'

'But I must be here, in this club-house, to-morrow evening at eleven.'

'To play cards? I did not know you were such a gamester.'

'I am not much of one now—or next to none.'

'Well, then——'

'I hardly like to confess the truth. Yet I must, for I shall need you. The fact of the matter is that, whilst waiting for you, I went into the card-room and met——'

'A loss at baccarat?'

'No; a challenge to a duel.'

'So soon?' said Caussade, bursting out a-laughing. 'Upon my word, my dear boy, you do not lose your time. You arrived this evening in Périgord, and before midnight you have a duel on your hands. Ha, ha! you hotheads of Bordeaux go the pace!'

'Satan himself mixed with it, for it was not a quarrel of my seeking.'

'A quarrel—with whom?'

'A gentleman who stood against all comers at dice—one not known to me.'

'I must know him, though, for I know everybody.'

'I do not believe he belongs to Périgord.'

'What is his name?'

'I did not ask it. The game is going on, only they are playing at baccarat at present. I was waiting for you to beg you to be my second, and set about the meeting regularly, for, so far, there has only been an interchange of bitter words.'

'You did not come to blows, I hope?'

'No.'

'Then it may be settled without going on the ground. But tell me what was the subject of the quarrel?'

'I thought I caught the person cheating——'

'And told him so?'

'Not precisely; but he clearly understood that I suspected him.'

'Humph! An accusation of cheating is serious, and if he is ever so little bent on fighting——You say he is still at the play?'

'Yes; the banker. Come, I'll show him to you.'

M. de Caussade rose, went over to the card-room doorway, looked at the banker, and said to Biscaros:

'That gentleman? Why, that is a friend of De Briouze's! It's the Viscount de Saint-Osvin.'

'The Viscount de Saint-Osvin!' repeated the Gascon, stupefied. 'It is not possible! You must be mistaken! I am speaking of the sandy gentleman sitting in the middle of the table, and holding the cards.'

'Quite so. That is the Viscount de Saint-Osvin. And it is my turn to tell you that you must be deceived—he has not cheated. He has not got to that depth yet,' he added aside, between his teeth. 'He has not perceived us,' he went on aloud, 'and it is needless he should do so. Come back again to our seats, and tell me what happened.'

Biscaros took his place once more on the lounge beside his mentor, and related the facts simply without any comments.

'What did they who were standing on your play say about the matter?' queried Caussade, when he had finished.

'Nothing; nobody supported me, and they seemed to make me out wrong. They changed the kind of play, but they still went on. You saw that they are still at it.'

'They will keep it up till daylight doth appear, be sure of that. But that is not the point. I also pronounce you wrong. None should accuse without proofs; and you had none.'

'I have the dice; and if they are found to be cogged——'

'You would still have to demonstrate that it was Saint-Osvin who brought them. Besides, I do

not suppose you called upon the committee to assemble to examine them.'

'Why should I not?'

'In the first place, because you have no standing to do so. You are only a country member. Besides, the whole committee would shrink from it. Saint-Osvin is a friend of the Marquis de Briouze, who presented him to "the Philologie," and the marquis's honour is beyond dispute.'

'But Saint-Osvin's is not, if I may believe the talk in the Arcachon Casino.'

'Lots of things are said—though I agree that the viscount is not in very good fame. He is held to be thoroughly ruined, and as he spends a great deal of money, people ask where the mischief he draws it from. But, for my part, I am never going to worry myself on that score. My principle is not to discuss my friends' friends. Briouze is the best and oldest of mine; he patronizes Saint-Osvin. In this case, the flag covers the goods. Saint-Osvin is not a man I like, but should I attack him, I would embroil myself with our dear marquis, and I have no longing to do it.'

'You mean to say that you refuse to assist me in the affair I am engaged in?'

'No; on the contrary, I shall do much to arrange it, without requiring any sacrifice of dignity on your part. When are your seconds to meet Saint-Osvin's?'

'To-morrow evening, at this club. He told me that he should be away all day.'

'Naturally; Briouze invited him to the hunt. You will see him again there.'

'No; for I shall take care not to go.'

'That would be uselessly hurting the feelings of a nobleman whom you have only to praise up to this moment; and if, in excuse of yourself, you tell him what has occurred here, it would make matters still worse.'

'He must know what has occurred. That gentleman will tell him to-morrow.'

'I do not believe so, no more than I do that he wants the dispute to grow into anything.'

'Is he a coward?'

'Not at all. He has "gone out" more than once for less serious reasons. But he is a sceptic, and does not believe he is bound to combat for every little saying. You yourself tell me that the bystanders did not uphold you, because not a soul believed that Saint-Osvin had cheated. He will assuredly fight, if you force him to do it. But if you abstain from calling him out, he will not stir; and, in truth, I do not see why you should call him out, for the injured party is not you, but he.'

'Incontestably. If he thinks himself satisfied after what I told him before thirty persons, he is free to do so; but I shall not retract.'

'Enough if you let the matter rest where it is, which is what I ask of you.'

'I can refuse you nothing, my dear Caussade, and since you wish so, I shall keep quiet. But I acknowledge to you that it costs me a pang not to

carry matters farther. I fence fairly, and if I should have the luck to kill this displeasing fellow I would have done a great service to ——'

He stopped as he was about to utter the marquis's name.

'Oh, don't check yourself, dear friend,' said M. de Caussade, smiling. 'You mean to name Briouze, and that he should be glad for your relieving his family of a lady-killer and fortune-hunter. You are not alone in the belief that Saint-Osvin is no "tame cat" on the domestic hearth, but I prefer as much as you not to tell the marquis so.'

'I shall not speak of it to others than you; but is it true he always means mischief?'

'I do not know anything about it, and I do not wish to know. I am very fond of Briouze, and the young ladies have always made me welcome. It would be most painful to me to cease to see them all, but I should be obliged to break off calling if I acquired the certainty that this dashing Fernand is compromising Mdlle. de Briouze.'

'I understand that you should speak in these terms, but I am astonished that an intelligent man of the world like the marquis should be blinded to what is going on—admitting that rumours current are well founded.'

'If there be any evil work, be sure that he does not suspect it. I am not going to tell him. Between hammer and anvil do not put your finger, my boy. The truth is that Briouze is not so young as he was once, and love for his children is growing

up to the exclusion of other feelings. He lets them do what they like with him. Anyway, it was not the young ladies who attracted Saint-Osvin to the family, though its head may repent of his coming; for this viscount, I grant, wants a deal of looking after.'

'How is it, then, that M. de Briouze is going to accept him as son-in-law?'

'Son-in-law! Tut, tut! He never dreamt of such a thing. He would have to be out of his wits to do that. Whence did you derive that nonsensical notion?'

'It has been stated to me that the viscount's marriage has been decided upon, but not with Mdlle. de Briouze—it is with her sister. My informant is in a way of knowing better than anybody else. It is also asserted that the wedding is to come off this winter.'

'You are being jested with, my dear Aurélien. The marquis aims too high for his elder daughter to match her with Saint-Osvin, but the case is worse as regards her sister. Mdlle. Nicole is twenty years younger than the viscount, and cannot endure him. I noticed that myself, and she told me so; moreover, however infatuated Briouze may be with the viscount, he is not ignorant that he is ruined and but poorly thought of. Briouze, who adores one daughter as much as the other, would not give either to him, I dare say. On the contrary, he would oppose either alliance, even if, by what is next to impossible, the young lady in question desired it.'

'How, impossible! Mdlle. de Briouze is understood to be more than friendly with the viscount.'

'She does not wish the union, I am confident. But tell me who is the ass with evil intentions who announced this false intelligence to you?'

'Suppose I tell you it was Mdlle. de Briouze?'

M. de Caussade stared hard at his young friend, as if to make sure he was really in his senses.

'Unfortunately, I am not joking. As I was riding through the forest on the day of my quitting Arcachon, I met Mdlle. de Briouze, who invited me to come to Mensignac, and let me know subsequently that her sister was to espouse M. de Saint-Osvin.'

'My dear fellow, I must believe what you tell me; and yet it is incredible. Such a marriage would be monstrous.'

'Do you agree with me on that?' quickly said Aurélien.

'Yes, I do. Wrongly or rightly, Saint-Osvin is believed to be bound to marry Mdlle. de Briouze if anybody. He cannot wed the younger sister, and, anyway, is it likely the elder would not oppose it.'

'But how if she desires it?'

'Did she tell you so?'

'Formally. She even appeared very eager to have it come to pass.'

'I do not understand.'

'I am afraid I do; she is no doubt tormented by the man—hampered—perhaps afraid to keep him

bound to the family, she wishes to sacrifice her half-sister.'

'It is horrible! it is impossible, I repeat. Briouze and Mdlle. Nicole could not be led into the abominable scheme. Besides, if there had been any question of such a project, Briouze would have told me.'

'The scheme must have been conceived by Mdlle. de Briouze, and she may not yet have broached it to him. She has kept it back until this Saint-Osvin will be at Mensignac to-morrow.'

'I will be there, too; and if Briouze has the weakness to let his daughter wheedle him I shall intervene, at the risk of a rupture. But though he may give way for domestic peace, Nicole will not. I know the girl. She is gentle and good—angelic; but she has an iron will, and I answer for it that she will not be married by force.'

'Who knows but that there may not be some plan to drive her into it?'

This supposition appeared to make an impression upon M. de Caussade.

'On what footing do you stand with her?' he bluntly demanded.

Biscaros blushed to the very tips of his ears.

'Good! I can guess,' proceeded Caussade. 'You love her?'

'Why should I deny it? I do love her, but without hope.'

'Hope springs eternal. If you please her, you may hope to wed her. Does she know that you love her?'

'I believe she does.'

'And she is not offended? Then she loves you. You would act very wrongly if you did not go to Mensignac with me. Two of us will be none too many to cope with the viscount—if it be true that he is the puppet of Mdlle. de Briouze.'

'So you are disposed to sustain me?'

'Yes; if you promise not to commit any imprudent act.'

'You mean if I do not pick a quarrel with M. de Saint-Osvin?'

'Just so. You have opened the trenches against him, and that will do now. Later on, if I perceive that Nicole's half-sister and the viscount have entered into partnership to wrest consent from Briouze and constrain Nicole, I shall not spare them; and though it would cost me pain, I should denounce them to my friend.'

'Then you counsel me to hold my tongue over this scene at the gaming-table?'

'For the moment, yes.'

'But what am I to do with the dice I confiscated?'

'The dice!' ejaculated M. de Caussade. 'Keep them, dash it all! Saint-Osvin will not claim them, and they may be useful hereafter to prove he is a rogue.'

'So you have changed opinion on his score?' said Aurélien. 'Just now you thought that he was incapable of cheating at play.'

'You had not then spoken of that scheme of

marriage. Now, I consider this man as an enemy, and all is fair to use as a weapon against an enemy. Keep those dice carefully, my dear boy, after having them stamped with the club seal. We will have them tested when the time comes for our great guns to be brought into action. But we are not at that point yet, and it is useless to open a fire by which our dear Briouze and his family might suffer. So then it is agreed that we go to-morrow morning. I will call for you at the Hôtel de France, where I will send you to-night a full equipment. Be ready at seven. The meet is at ten o'clock, forty kilomètres from Périgueux, and on our way by we will leave our traps at Mensignac. You know the day's programme—breakfast in the woods, and back to dinner to the Château.'

'I do not promise to dine there.'

'You are free in your movements, dear friend. Still, allow me to hope that you will stay, if only to pass one evening with Nicole. She may not be in the hunt, but she will be at dinner, and she would doubtlessly be astonished not to see you there.'

'I will do what you wish; but my presentiment is that I had better keep out of it.'

'Abstinence is of no good when a man is in love—and you are madly so, I am sure.'

'That is true; and I agree to accompany you to-morrow, because I mean to learn my fate as soon as possible.'

Biscaros did not say everything, and for a reason. Even to a sure friend he could not confide the fact

of Nicole's sending him her ball-tablets, and calling him to her succour, and that he was resolved not to leave her at daggers-drawn with her half-sister.

'Very good!' cried out Caussade. 'You will not repent having followed my advice. Now, if you'll follow my cue, we will take French leave—I mean, without showing ourselves in the card-room. It is at least useless that Saint-Osvin should know we are acquaintances.'

'He will see that when we meet in the hunt.'

'Yes; but he will not know that we talked over your quarrel at play—that's what I want. If you keep quiet, all will go well. Shall we go?'

'When you please. From this moment forward I place myself in your hands.'

The sage Caussade took his ward out, after a passing confabulation with the club secretary to have the dice stamped with date and the Philologie's brand, and conducted him to the door of the Hôtel de France, where he left him, without having again brought up the topic which occupied both their minds.

Aurélien could not sleep. His life was to be at stake the next day, and sleeplessness is excusable on the eve of a battle. He had no difficulty in rising before the dawn, and at the appointed hour M. de Caussade found him fully ready.

His nephew's shooting-suit became Biscaros very well. In his old friend's dog-cart was put the box containing his evening-dress, for he was almost prepared to accept the invitation to see Mensignac,

Caussade had converted him to his ideas, and he had decided to conform in every point with his instructions.

Caussade, although half-ruined, had preserved out of his past splendour a vehicle and a good horse, which he himself drove. It was now his only luxury—one which the Périgordian gentlemen find it hardest to give up, as country-seats abound in those parts, and neighbours are welcome everywhere.

Visits are made on every occasion, without studying distance. Ten leagues between breakfast and dinner is merely an appetiser, and a man does the same thing on the morrow.

Our friends took only two hours to arrive at Mensignac, but they did not say a word bearing on the dwellers there. All they spoke about was Paris, where Caussade talked of going soon to spend a couple of months, or even a little more, if the money he had saved out of his budget did not melt too quickly.

He pressed Biscaros to do the same, than which the younger man longed for nothing better ; but this pleasure-trip was subordinate to events wholly independent of his will.

CHAPTER X.

A ONE-SIDED DUEL.

MENSIGNAC was an old lordly residence, almost entirely rebuilt and considerably enlarged by the Marquis de Briouze, who had purchased it five years previously of an owner 'broken' on Fortune's wheel at the Philologie Club, like many of his fellow-countrymen.

M. de Briouze did not often live in it, but when he did, he lived on a grand scale. Liveried domestics lounged in a broad courtyard protected by gilded iron rails, although the master had already gone off to the hunt, and two handsome wagonettes attested that, as far as equipages went, the marquis and his guests would have plenty of choice.

Without going within the palings, M. de Caussade hailed a footman, who hastened to take the valises and tell him that they were expected.

The delay was not long; but before Caussade started his horse on the road to the appointment-place, Aurélien—who viewed with as much emotion as curiosity the abode where Mdlle. Nicole might then be—saw a hand raise the curtain of one of the

first-floor windows, and the sweet face of Nicole smiling on him. It even seemed to him that she made a sign, which he interpreted in his own way. He imagined that it meant: 'Thanks for coming. I have more than ever need to see you. This evening!'

Only lovers can see so much in a nod, and it is clear that dumb language was created for them.

Aurélien had no time to reply by any expressive pantomime, as the curtain almost instantaneously fell. He thought no longer of refusing to dine at the Château that evening.

He would have liked to catch a glimpse of Bernadette, who certainly would not have gone hunting the boars, and who might have run out, but the Cadichonne did not show herself.

Caussade, busy in gathering up the reins, had seen nothing. He whipped his horse, which went off at a jog-trot. The road was in splendid condition, and in less than an hour the two friends arrived at the skirts of a forest which did not at all remind them of that of Arcachon, as there was not a single pine-tree to be spied.

Nothing but oaks, beeches, and birches overtopped the thick underwood.

It was a fine tract of woodland planted by the State, which M. de Briouze had hired for the hunting-season.

Our friends were the last to arrive.

Three large four-horse breaks were stationed at the mouth of a broad way cut through the thicket,

and the sportsmen were assembled round M. de Briouze, who was giving orders to keepers bearing an armorial metal badge on the arm.

These few guests were neighbours, of no pretensions to fashion, and Biscaros was not astonished to see that Mdlle. de Briouze had not mingled with these rustic squires.

He perceived her twenty paces off, dressed in a fancy attire : a Polish cap ornamented with a white aigrette, a plaid kilt coming down to the knee, black velvet knickerbockers, and patent leather gaiters. This almost masculine costume became her marvellously, notwithstanding her figure inclined to be stout, and added a peculiar piquancy to her beauty.

M. de Saint-Osvin was not present, and Biscaros did not regret an absence which he could not explain.

The appearance of the belated pair made a 'sensation.' The marquis ran to them, shook hands, and began to expose his plan for the hunt, when his daughter joined them.

She did not show an unkind face to M. de Caussade, but her eyes flashed when she responded to the compliment Aurélien addressed to her upon her costume ; and he saw at once that she had not been appeased since their dialogue, interrupted so timely by the excursionists from Bordeaux.

'You are going to stay a few days, of course?' she said coaxingly. 'This morning,' she went on, as Aurélien excused himself, 'you belong to the outdoor diversions ; but my sister and I rely on

your company this evening. We will play and sing whilst these Nimrods laud the finest shots made in the day.'

'You girls may do what you like, my dear Dolores,' interrupted M. de Briouze; 'but, at this moment, we ought to be at our stations. My huntsman has headed off a herd of boars, and if we dawdle here they will have time to run beyond the bounds. The beaters are in a line at the other end of this cutting, and only waiting for La Ramée's blast of the horn to commence. Come, come, gentlemen! the clearing, on the edge of which I am going to place you, is five hundred yards away. Let us be off, therefore. Saint-Osvin does not answer at the muster—so much the worse for him. In hunting-time there is no grace—it's the rule.'

They had to follow the speaker over the road where he had left his party. Caussade knew every member of it, but Biscaros not one. The introductions were gone through as they walked on.

In no hurry to have the first shot, Mdlle. de Briouze hung behind.

If Aurélien, who preceded her by fifty paces, had turned round, he would certainly have noticed that she stopped rather often to listen and glance behind her.

A jingle of bells and cracking of a whip heralded the arrival of a vehicle.

It soon came out on the crossways of the trysting-place—an old postchaise drawn by two pair, with postboys in livery—and the late-comer it brought

briskly got out to go on foot to overtake the sportsmen.

Mdlle. de Briouze, being on the look-out, recognised Fernand de Saint-Osvin from afar, and slackened her pace to let him catch up with her.

She had intended to have this parley before the requirements of the hunt separated her from the viscount.

He arrived correctly 'got up' as usual, and more foppish than ever; his whiskers were carefully combed, his lips wore a smile, and his conquering air was that of a happy Don Juan. But his fatigued features revealed plainly enough that he had not had sleep. In fact, he had spent the night in gambling, as M. de Caussade had foretold on the previous eve to Biscaros.

He soon joined Mdlle. de Briouze, whom he accosted, hat in hand.

The sportsmen were not yet out of sight, and as they might turn round, Saint-Osvin meant to keep up appearances. But they could not hear, and he opened the conversation on a familiar footing.

'So I see you again at length!' he said in a warm voice. 'Why did you consign me to Paris for two months, which is a desert at this season? It was like passing a summer in Sahara; and I am dying of thirst for a glance of your eyes.'

'You acted very properly in not coming to Arcachon,' coldly returned the dark lady; 'and I have only written you to come to Mensignac because I have serious matters to talk about.'

'I know nothing more serious than love,' laughingly interrupted Saint-Osvin.

'A passing delusion.'

'Mine is not. I will prove it whenever you like.'

'I do not want the proof.'

'Do you mean to say I have no hopes?'

'Are you sure I ever let you entertain any?' scornfully questioned Dolores.

'Why, it seemed to me that for a year past——'

'Yes, it's true—you have pleased me for a year. I thank you for having reminded me—a year is a long while.'

'Is it to pay me this compliment that you have called me into Périgord?' replied the viscount, stung to the quick.

'It means that everything grows tiresome in time. For example, you used to be very fond of whist once on a time?'

'To the point of folly.'

'Yet you no longer play it?'

'No. I constantly lost at it, and I often win at baccarat.'

'Well, so with flirtation. You follow me?'

'Thoroughly, mademoiselle. You have changed your sport. What is he like whom you prefer now?—fair or dark?'

'Pray, cease your banter; I am in no humour to support it.'

'It is you who are trifling, if I am not mistaken, and I am no more ready than you to support it.'

'Drop all that, and listen to me,' proceeded the lady, with a stamp of the foot in impatience. 'In five minutes we shall have joined the hunt, and I have no time to lose in discussion about self-conceit. We have been making game of one another quite long enough, I declare to you.'

'And you want to break off?'

'I have decided to do so.'

'You forget that from the day when you wrote me too-outspoken a letter you placed yourself at my mercy. I could win you by saying one word.'

'To whom? to my father? He would horse-whip you, and you would be driven out of society everywhere. Society winks at a number of villainous acts, but not at blackmail. If I wanted to do so, I could ruin you, too. It would be enough if I told what I know of you.'

'What? that you have sometimes paid me hush-money—hem! I mean, lent me money? I defy you to do it. It would be like firing on your own troops. You, being a woman, would be more disgraced than I.'

I answered one stupid threat by another. But we have as much interest one as the other in not quarrelling.'

'Then why do you want to drop me?'

'Because, I repeat, I do not care for you any longer.'

'The reason appears insufficient to me. The hope of winning you may flit, but then the pleasure

of your acquaintance might remain, and I should be content with that.'

'I should not.'

'Confess that you have already replaced me.'

'What's that to you? I do not ask you to remain faithful to me. What I wish is a friendly parting. I disentangle myself, and I set you free.'

'It's a present I shall not accept,' sneered the viscount.

'Because you would lose by it, eh? My patronage has helped you on, and held you on slippery ground. My father's friendship is useful to you, as I know, and I understand that you would deplore its loss. But you shall not lose his precious friendship.'

The Fascinating Fernand could not recover coolness at hearing the dark-eyed enchantress, whom he fancied he held by the dread of scandal, shake her yoke off and divine his most secret thoughts. He might have said to himself that he was reaping what he had sown, as it was he who taught her cynicism.

'So you believe,' he said abruptly, 'that I am attached to you solely out of love of gain? You are hard, my dear.'

'Hard but wholesome, as the panegyrists say of whole-meal bread. Hear me out to the end, when you will be forced to acknowledge that I only wish your good.'

'When you demonstrate that——'

'I beg you only to answer me one question. Is it not true that you are kept up in society solely by your relations with the Marquis of Briouze, whose incontestable fame covers you?'

'I esteem this friendship at its full value; but——'

'Oh, do not bicker about words! To my father you owe the fact of your not being talked about openly. Well, if in the circle where you live, but are only accepted *pro tem.*, you were anchored by a grand marriage, you must confess that you would gain.'

'I grant I should! Then would you marry me?'

'Never!'

'Thanks for your frankness!' said Saint-Osvin ironically.

'We are not talking about me, as you very well know.'

'Of whom, then? I can see none but you who would take my viscountess's coronet, a little tarnished.'

'A truce to impertinence! Are you ready to marry?'

'A very rich, noble, and pretty woman?'

'I think you would content yourself with the first of these advantages.'

'Tell me at once that you want to propose to me someone of blemished reputation or hump-backed.'

'You are thoroughly wrong. The person I destine for you is as well off as I am—maybe she

will be better off, and as highborn. She is younger, and—and——'

'Not more lovely! I shall not believe that.'

This apropos compliment did not appear to move Dolores.

'I beg you to answer me categorically,' she pursued. 'Yes or no: would you marry a young lady as well-dowered by nature as by her parents?'

Saint-Osvin believed this was a trap laid by Mdlle. de Briouze, and that she was putting him to the test. It is a trial often imposed by women on the retreat from the battle of love when they fear their ally is about deserting them.

'I should be delighted if I had not known you,' he said, viewing Dolores fondly; 'but no marriage, however brilliant, could console me for the loss of you.'

He fully relied on the lady, touched by so much disinterestedness, recompensing him by confessing that she had only tried to tempt him in order to make sure that he loved her, and that an alliance with her was his sole aim.

How could he believe that the offer was sincere? He was too keen to be ignorant that his reputation was not one of those which assist a man to win the hand of an opulent heiress of position in the world.

He was very much astonished to see that his declaration produced no effect whatever upon Mdlle. de Briouze.

'You will lose me, whatever happens,' she said without hesitating. 'All is ended between us, I repeat to you. You must take your course accordingly, for nothing will make me revoke my resolution.'

This time the viscount comprehended that she was speaking seriously, and he instantly changed his tone.

'Very well,' he replied. 'I guessed it. You have made another choice. Did you captivate him at Arcachon?'

'I have no accounts to show you, and I return to the question which I put to you. You say you lose very much by not marrying me—will you accept the damages I offer you? I want to have this immediately settled.'

'I must at least know whom you want me to marry.'

'A young lady of your acquaintance.'

'Who, consequently, knows me. Has she charged you to make to me these matrimonial overtures?'

'She does not suspect my project.'

'But you imagine she will like me? She will laugh in your face when you talk to her about marrying me.'

'Hence I am not going to talk it over with her. It will fall to you to induce her to consent. I will show you the goal, and leave to you the choice of the means to employ to attain it. But I shall aid you.'

'I see that I am undoubtedly nothing to you

now,' interrupted Saint-Osvin. 'Tell me the name of my intended.'

Mdlle. de Briouze paused an instant to look the jilted one in the face, and said:

'I am astonished that you should not have divined that I am talking about my half-sister.'

'Mdlle. Nicole!' ejaculated the viscount. 'You do not think what you are saying!'

'I have thought over the matter so thoroughly, that I suggest you should pay your court this very evening.'

'It would be losing my time. She cannot bear me. You must have perceived the look she gives me.'

'Indeed, I believe you do not please her.'

'Well, then?'

'That is one of the reasons why I desire this marriage,' said Dolores, with a singular smile.

Was it hatred for Nicole which prompted this reply? The Fascinating Fernand thought so.

'So you deeply detest her?' he exclaimed.

'She does not please me, and the feeling is reciprocal. She holds me in horror.'

'And yet you hope to convert her to the idea of marrying me, whom she also execrates?'

'Convert her to it—no! but force her to it—yes!'

'By what process, pray? You have no authority over your sister—only half-sister, too—and your father, who adores her, is not the man to make her wed against her will.'

'My father? I can do anything I like with him. I have managed to obtain your admission into his inner circle of friends.'

'That is not at all the same thing. He has never suspected that I was paying my addresses to you. He would not sacrifice his daughters.'

'I undertake to bring him to it, when matters are at the point I wish.'

'To what point? Explain yourself.'

'You have not a clear head this morning, my friend, unless you feign not to understand me. There is what is called the forced card, which conjurors compel you to take in spite of yourself. In society there are forced marriages.'

'Not when the young lady detests her suitor, and is on her guard against him.'

'It will be enough if you seem to have her heart.'

'Granted; but how are we to gull your father to that extent?'

'Oh, my dear friend, you are playing the part of a simpleton too long, and it does not suit you. How do match-making mammas entrap a man into a promise of marriage? They contrive to surprise the man when he is kissing the daughter's hand at a *tête-à-tête* he believes unwitnessed—in vain does the girl protest that her hand was seized—all consider the man a lucky wooer — and immediate marriage is the sole reparation. The case is inverted, as we would entrap the girl; but you can act in the same way, with my father to surprise you.'

'I do not say anything to the contrary, but, deuce take it! when there is a man about, a father, for instance, the amorous burglar's character is not a happy one. He may end his adventure in the assize court. I might tell you a tale, fifty years old, of a cavalry lieutenant, educated at the Saumur College. They gave him ten years' imprisonment, and he acted Jachimo only because of a wager.'

'I see no connection with your tale. Mensignac is not a military college. I had no idea you were so squeamish. Nothing venture, nothing win; and when there is a million of francs for dowry, a man would risk more than what you say.'

'A million! I never thought that your father was rich enough to dower a daughter with a million.'

'If he only should give her half, Nicole would be an unexpected windfall—to you. With me your ally, you will be playing to win. Will you let me do it with you?'

'I can refuse you nothing,' evasively responded the viscount.

'Very well. Without any delay I shall set to work to prepare your path. When we meet again, after the hunt, I will tell you what I expect of you. Now let us hasten to join those gentlemen, who are growing impatient.'

'Yes, your excellent father is beckoning to us. If he only knew what we were talking about——'

'Not another word on the subject we have treated of. I believe you know all our guests, except the

one he is now chatting with. He will present him to you.'

This was Aurélien Biscaros; and he turned his back on Saint-Osvin, who inquired:

'One of your rustic neighbours, I suppose?'

'No. A young gentleman of Bordeaux, whom we often met in the Casino at Arcachon, and whom we expect to receive at Paris this winter. Father rather likes him.'

'Your father only?'

'We like him, too.'

'Very well, I understand. This is your new plaything.'

Dolores did not take the trouble to deny. Turning round, Biscaros showed his countenance.

'Oh!' sneeringly laughed the Fascinating Fernand, 'I know my substitute! and little expected to meet him here.'

'Where did you know him?' asked the astounded lady; 'where and when?'

'Last night. He won money from me at the Philologie Club; and took the liberty of raising a doubt, about which I have a lesson to give him.'

'Not under our roof, I trust?'

'No. I shall wait till we are both in Périgueux again. We have settled so far.'

'A duel! I forbid you fighting.'

'Afraid I shall kill him? Do not be alarmed, my friend; I will content myself with giving him a good lesson.'

'I forbid it. I tell you that, if you do fight against my prohibition, it shall cost you dear.'

'Less dear than the whim of yours which makes you throw me over.'

'I have broken off with you, it is true; but I intend to remain friendly, and if you should not heed the last command I give you, you will have a fierce enemy in me. It is peace or war, at your choice. Do not reply to me,' went on Dolores sharply, as the viscount was going to protest; 'here are the others.'

Indeed, M. de Briouze was coming forward, flanked by Biscaros and Caussade, and calling out:

'Do hurry! you will make us lose the sport. We have waited for you, but the boars will not wait. What a deuced laggard you are, Fernand! you always keep people waiting! I'll wager you have been wasting the night over cards.'

'Not the whole of it, my friend. I spent some of it in shaking dice,' responded Saint-Osvin, looking fixedly at Biscaros, as if he wished to taunt him into recalling the incident which disturbed the gaming-party at the club. 'How d'e do, Caussade?' he went on, holding out to the Périgordian gentleman his hand, accepted without enthusiasm and shaken without feeling. 'Now, my dear Henri,' he resumed, 'pray make me acquainted with this gentleman whom I have not yet had the pleasure of seeing in your house. Before we go hunting together, we ought to know one another; do you not think so?'

'Quite right,' said M. de Briouze, smiling.

He performed the introduction without any comment, limiting himself to naming Aurélien Biscaros, who merely bowed coldly to the viscount.

Biscaros remembered the advice given him overnight by his friend Caussade, and M. de Saint-Osvin made no allusion to the scene in the Philologie, for fear of embroiling himself with his old love.

In appearance impassible, she witnessed this ceremonious colloquy, but she devoured Aurélien with her eyes.

If Fernand the Fascinating had doubted still that he stood in face of a rival, that gaze of Dolores must have enlightened him. He knew that burning gaze, for she had looked at him in the same way when she saw him for the first time. It was her manner of casting a spell over a man.

As Biscaros was incontestably a very good-looking fellow, Fernand vowed to be revenged on his fortunate rival.

He had yet to know that Biscaros, after unintentionally winning away one sister from him, had won the other, so that the compensation promised by the fiendish Dolores might escape the discarded suitor.

'Come, come, gentlemen,' said the marquis, 'it is high time we opened the battle. Here is the enclosure which the sportsmen are to keep. Kindly follow me. I will place you.'

The space devoted to the members of the shooting-party was large enough for them to be posted

on three of its sides, whilst the beaters and trackers came in at the fourth.

These were a dozen peasants, who only awaited the signal to begin beating the bushes where the wild swine were harboured.

There was no more to be done but distribute the posts so as to give the best to the finest shots, or such guests as the master of the hunt wanted to favour.

M. de Briouze took care not to fail in this custom. He placed the unimportant squires on the sides of the cutting, and his one-day guests on the side where the heavy game would probably rush out.

Dolores feared nothing, not even an old 'lone' boar with sharp tusks, and she shot marvellously well. Her father put her in the centre of the line, the post of honour—between Caussade on the right, fifty paces off, and Biscaros at the same distance on the left.

His friend Saint-Osvin was set at the far end, fifty paces beyond Biscaros; when this was done, he went modestly to join the beaters in order to leave the best head to his guests, while at the risk of receiving a bullet from some hasty marksman.

The four privileged sportsmen—one a lady, by the way—had a clearing before them covered with withered grass and a sparsely-grown thicket; it was a cutting, made a couple of years before, where there were young shrubs and some bushes sufficiently large to hide a man behind them.

At the edge of the road rose a row of old oak-trees, thick enough and far enough apart for each to be shelter for a sportsman.

This was not a useless precaution, for a wild-boar hunt is always dangerous pastime, from which ladies generally abstain from taking any part But Dolores de Briouze was not an ordinary woman.

With his back to a tree, Biscaros watched her from afar, and could not help admiring her as she stood in a showy attitude, letting her gun rest on her left arm with her finger on the trigger, and her eye on the alert, like an outposted sentinel expecting an enemy.

The stillness was profound. Not a breath of air rustled the leaves, and the beaters, having a rather wide circuit to make to surround the thicket, had not yet commenced their uproar.

Biscaros was not thinking of the hunt at all, though he had much taste for this kind of sport.

He was thinking of Nicole, whom he had not yet had the pleasure of seeing for long; of M. de Briouze, who had given him the most encouraging reception; of the dreaded Dolores and of her unworthy gallant. He wondered how the day was going to finish, and he augured ill of it, in spite of the optimist predictions of the good-hearted Caussade.

Soon burst forth the shouts of the trackers approaching the enclosure, and he had to drop his meditation to get ready to fire; for boars are not like fawns, which a tender heart will often let trot

by. Boars charge the gentlemen who miss them, and absence of mind may cost a sportsman dear.

Biscaros did not wait long. A gunshot resounded in the underwood well in front of him, and he almost instantly heard a dull, precipitous rumble, as if a squad of cavalry were galloping through the brush. Aroused by the noise made by the beaters, a herd of wild boars came out of their lair and rushed on at full speed. It was not slow to come out into the clearing.

The sow raced at the head, followed by three large pigs, making straight for the line of shooters, which they meant to break through between Biscaros and his right-hand neighbour.

Before the sow arrived close, two gunshots were fired on the right, and a brace of the pigs rolled over, killed outright.

Dolores had used both barrels with marvellous effect.

Biscaros had reserved his fire. At the moment when he fired at easy range, he heard a shot whistling, immediately followed by a 'thud,' and he felt a pain on the face.

The sow passed without being hit, cleared the road with one leap, and disappeared in the thick of the undergrowth with the sole survivor of her progeny.

Rather vexed at having missed, Biscaros felt his cheek, which was bleeding, and examined the trunk of the oak against which he had been leaning to fire.

He saw a quite fresh graze. A bullet, after having glanced along his cheek, had lodged in the wood, and the bark it knocked off had scratched his face.

The marksman who had sent it must have been singularly unskilful; it could only be the viscount, for the shot had come from the left side. Biscaros looked thither, and saw him putting a cartridge into his hammerless breechloader which had cost sixty louis. Hence it was he who had just fired, and it might be supposed that he had done so, not at the sow, but at his neighbour.

If he had killed Biscaros, it would have been set down to accident.

A little more, and Biscaros might have retorted with a bullet which would have certainly had its billet, for he had a true eye.

It was a capital occasion to rid Nicole of a cowardly scoundrel who proposed wedding her, M. de Briouze of a parasite who shamefully sponged on him, and even Dolores of an extortionist.

Biscaros, however, had coolness enough to reason before acting. To kill Fernand the Fascinating, would be inverting the characters, he thought. It would not be believed that he had been lawfully defending himself, and he would be taken for a murderer.

It was quite enough that he was accused of the murder of Gémozac. He did not at all yield to

the temptation of ending a wretch's life. In his pocket he had what would confound him hereafter. But he promised to watch his movements until the end of the hunt, and he hastened to reload in provision of a second attack.

CHAPTER XI.

THE REGRETTED SHOT.

MDLLE. DE BRIOUZE had seen nothing. She had fallen into position again to bring down more boars, as the battle was not over. So far from it, in fact, that a loud clamour arose in the wood, and the voice of the keeper directing the trackers was heard shouting:

'Look out there ahead! a lone boar is coming to you!'

Almost instantly Biscaros heard the well-known crash announcing the rush of an old boar from afar.

The thicket crackled under the weight of the brutish mass, tearing along like a cannon-ball, and the lowermost branches fell sundered by his terrible tusks like wheat before the reaper's sickle.

The enormous beast had hardly burst into the open before Mdlle. de Briouze sent him the contents of both barrels which she had had time to recharge.

They did not kill the boar, but unfortunately only galled him, so that he rushed furiously on her, bristling, his eye on fire, and his tusks flashing.

All would have been over with the dark Dolores

had not a well put-in bullet stopped the monster; had Biscaros withheld that ball he would have been for ever delivered of the wicked passion which he dreaded more than the viscount's hatred.

He did not think of it for a second. He turned half round, put his gun to his shoulder and fired; the lone boar, struck in the heart, fell at the very feet of Nicole's sister.

Biscaros ran up and found her very pale and agitated.

She had a narrow escape, for the animal was of a strength fit to rip up a horse, and if Biscaros had missed him, he would not have missed the lady.

She grasped her rescuer's hand and said:

'Thank you! I am glad to owe my life to you.' Drawing him closer, she added in a whisper: 'For I love you!'

Biscaros receded as though he had been stung by a serpent. She had reminded him, most untimely, that in saving her he had done Nicole a very unkind service.

His heart was too highly placed to regret what he had done; but he would have preferred less tender thanks from her, and he did not reply by one word to the burning declaration blurted out to him.

'But you are wounded!' she exclaimed, pointing to Aurélien's bleeding cheek.

'It's nothing,' muttered the deliverer; 'a twig gave me a scratch.'

The viscount came up in no great haste. He approached them, and met with rare impudence

the threatening look which Mdlle. de Briouze glared upon him.

'I was too far off to fire to any good,' said he lightly. 'Your neighbour undertook it, and all the honour falls to him of this capital shot. All my compliments, monsieur; you are a first-class shot, and I am not up to your mark.'

'It struck me, nevertheless, that you came not far off your target just now,' replied Biscaros with a sharpness which astonished the lady.

But she was so keen-witted that she almost divined what had happened. She knew of what the Fascinating Fernand was capable, and she already repented not having driven him away instead of offering to immolate poor Nicole to her spite.

He was not affected by Biscaros' response, and he tranquilly said:

'I see that you noticed that my bullet passed very nigh the beast I fired at. I heard it strike a stone under the sow, and it must have glanced away to a great distance.'

This was possible, and the explanation was clever; but Aurélien doubted that the shot which almost entered his head came there purely by accident.

'You have a true aim, monsieur,' proceeded the viscount, 'and you very well understand the singular effects of projectiles. Anyone can see that the handling of firearms is familiar to you.'

Dolores understood the allusion, and again darted an evil look on the dismissed suitor.

Biscaros also comprehended the allusion, and did not doubt that Saint-Osvin had learnt, after the card-party, about the unpleasant adventure which occurred in the Forest of Arcachon.

Biscaros thought to himself that he would soon have a full account to settle with this venomous enemy.

At this juncture arrived the pacific Adhémas de Caussade, who did not dream of the danger run by Mdlle. de Briouze.

Caussade only hunted to please his friend Briouze. He let himself be led away and stuck in a corner where, facing the wood, he fell a-musing, like a poet, of quite other things than game.

He had hardly perceived the bachelor boar come out of cover, and had the wild porkers been intelligent animals, they must have come up to run between the contemplative Perigordian's legs, for he probably would not have thought of firing at them.

On the other hand, M. de Briouze was a passionate lover of the noble sport, so as to move up with the line of beaters instead of standing in the rank of the sportsmen.

It was he who had routed out the lone boar. By the direction it had taken on the start, he feared that it would go straight at his daughter. The repeated shots had agitated him, and he ran up rather uneasy about the sequel of the fusilade.

Dolores went to meet him, and apprised him in a few words of what had happened. The good

old nobleman flung himself on Biscaros's breast, and thanked him warmly.

'Now, my dear friend, you are one of the family,' he said, between two embraces. 'We will keep you at Mensignac until our departure, and we will take you to town with us.'

A mocking smile appeared on the viscount's lips, and really, for those who knew the seamy side of the situation, it was funny enough. A wicked soul introducing her sister's lover, who was her beloved, to the father whom she had long deceived, was grimly ludicrous.

Caussade, who knew how matters stood, deemed it his duty to cut this ill-placed gratitude short by suggesting a return to the Château, and everybody sided with him in his advice.

They did not return with empty bags, as they brought a wild boar of upwards of five hundred pounds weight. The weather threatened to turn wet, so that there was no talk of picnicking on the grass, as had been projected. The guests, who came up, agreed to modify that part of the programme.

The breaks filled up. Biscaros and Caussade got into their dog-cart, and the Viscount de Saint-Osvin into his post-chaise, and the word was: 'Drive on, coachman, for Mensignac.'

'On the ground were left only the keepers and some hardened Nimrods, who declared themselves resolved not to leave the place until they had knocked over one or two dozen rabbits to con-

sole themselves for not even having seen the wild pigs.

During the drive, Caussade, who was in good humour as usual, complimented Aurélien on his skill, and did not forget to felicitate him, too, on not having picked a quarrel with M. de Saint-Osvin ; but the absent-minded Aurélien responded only by monosyllables, and the conversation flagged.

To keep it up, Caussade set to explaining to his friend how the word hospitality was understood at the Château de Mensignac.

He said, life there went on as at a great English nobleman's mansion. At pleasure, each might hunt or fish, ride or walk, and even pass the day in reading or smoking without leaving one's rooms. 'It is complete liberty up to dinner-hour. Breakfast is taken at will in one's own rooms, or in the breakfast-room. At table in the evening, strict dress is imposed, but after that meal, one is not bound to join the ladies in the drawing-room to chat or listen to music.'

'After dinner,' muttered Biscaros, 'I suppose we shall return to Périgueux ?'

'Why ? Briouze reckons strongly on keeping you. Thinking the matter over thoroughly, I willingly decide to spend two or three days at Mensignac, and I shall not waste my time, as I will sound Briouze about that project of marriage you mentioned. I fancy it never existed outside of Mdlle. de Briouze's brain, but I want to know

positively how we stand. Besides, Nicole would bear you a grudge if you went away so quickly.'

'I will act as you do,' replied Aurélien who, at heart, wanted to remain.

Soldiers do not quit their post on the eve of battle, and it was really a battle about to be waged, with the hand of Nicole de Briouze at stake.

The four-in-hands had distanced Caussade's modest turn-out, and, on arriving at Mensignac, the two friends found none to receive them but François, the marquis's valet-de-chambre.

The master of the house, the hunting lady, and their other guests, including the Viscount de Saint-Osvin, had gone to change their dress.

For the moment Caussade and Biscaros had nothing else themselves to do, and they followed François to their rooms—two very stylishly-furnished sleeping-chambers, separated by a sitting-room full of artistic ornaments.

Bircaros shut himself up in his bedroom to dress, but chiefly to reflect.

He fancied that the valet had eyed him askant. He thought that he had not forgotten the entrance of the police commissary into the Periwinkles Châlet, and was perhaps astonished to have to wait upon a person at Mensignac whom he had seen hauled off to Arcachon by the gendarmes.

This inopportune meeting was another thorn among the roses! Aurélien had given up keeping count of them, and he sadly said to himself that

the remembrance of his misadventure would long pursue him.

He had to model his course by that, yet he could be comforted if Nicole should not change her feelings.

He was eager to see her. He did not hope to meet her alone; but lovers understand without speaking, and he flattered himself that he might ascertain his fate by merely exchanging glances with her.

Besides, he had another means of informing himself, which was by questioning Bernadette. She would not shun a dialogue, and the freedom of country-house life would permit the Gascon to meet her somewhere.

He even determined to help on chance, by setting in search of the Cadichonne.

He had not yet perceived her, but she was not of the mood to confine herself to the servants' hall or to her mistress's ante-room: Bernadette liked the open air and bustle. Hence Aurélien was almost sure to meet her in the grounds or on the stairs.

He dressed himself slowly, the while he mused over the episodes of the boar hunt: the murderous attempt to which he had nearly fallen victim, and the capital service he had rendered the elder daughter.

'I am passing my life in saving her,' he muttered between his grating teeth. 'In the Forest of Arcachon she would have broken her neck if I

had not been at hand to check her horse, which had run away with her, although she asserted the contrary. This morning, if I had not fired, the boar would have made mince-meat of her as he would of a boar-hound. And this woman is her sister's sworn enemy, and her worthless accomplice has tried to assassinate me! No doubt he will try it again, and she will again annoy me with her hysterical rubbish. Clearly, I am only committing follies, and they ought to be ended. I shall stay over this evening, but I will be off to-morrow.'

Whilst thus speaking to himself, he had gone to the window which overlooked the park, and he spied through the panes Mdlle. de Briouze and the viscount walking side by side down a narrow path.

They had lost no time in meeting.

They had already changed dress, as he was in a frock-coat and she in a fashionable walking dress.

Aurélien's room was situated on the first floor, and he could see them as well as if he were in the grounds—better even, for he was on a higher level, and they would not suspect they were watched.

He could not hear what they said, but he did not let one of their gestures slip him, and these betrayed their speech.

'Ha!' muttered Biscaros, 'the Fascinating Fernand protests. I'll wager that the lady accuses him of having shot at me. He swears that she wrongfully accuses him, and she appears to believe him, for she becomes calm. Now, he seems to be

making love to her; but she hushes him up, and she broaches a subject which doubtlessly interests M. de Saint-Osvin, for he listens very attentively to her. He raises objections—she refutes them—the discussion becomes sharp, for they break off their stroll every now and then to argue it out face to face. What can they be wrangling over? Nicole, perhaps?'

'Yes; the false sister is urging him to ask her hand in marriage, and she promises to back up his request to the marquis. Good! he nods, as much as clearly to say: "I give in. I will do what you like—come what come may!" They are agreed. Poor Nicole must be on her guard. Between her and that worthy couple the game is not equal; but I am here to defend her, and I should be sure to preserve her from their attacks if I could only know what they are plotting against her.'

Suddenly Biscaros's attention was elsewhere attracted from following them.

They were strolling side by side, skirting a high hornbeam hedge.

Mensignac park was not laid out in the English fashion. It was planted with old trees, and broken up with clumps, like one may still see at Versailles.

On the other side of the wall of foliage along which the conspirators sauntered, Biscaros just caught a glimpse of a woman who seemed to be spying them, for she stole along like a wolf, and stopped when they did.

This was Bernadette. He recognised her straightway, and his heart leaped for joy.

The honest Cadichonne was not for their cause, and she would only be dogging them to surprise the secret of their plot.

To learn it, Biscaros would only have to question her, and she would not refuse to ally herself with him against Nicole de Briouze's worst foes.

And now he knew where to find her.

The conversation continued, with less gesticulation ; no doubt, the compact was concluded.

It was probably to seal it that the dark lady put in her confederate's hand an object which the Gascon could not make out at that distance ; but Bernadette must have seen it clearly, for she was peering at that juncture through the grove.

Biscaros asked nothing more, and had only to wait until the end of the colloquy to go down into the park, where he hoped to join the Cadichonne.

Almost on the instant, Saint-Osvin and Mdlle. de Briouze went away, each to one side, having no more to say.

The lady returned into the house, whilst the Fascinating Fernand proceeded towards the stables, where the marquis had some thoroughbreds to show him.

Bernadette let them go, and quickly running up the path, where she had been ensconced, disappeared behind a group of trees.

This was the moment to find her in, and Biscaros did not lose an instant.

Caussade had already gone down to the dining-room. His friend, who had no longing to eat, was lucky enough not to meet anybody on the stairs which he took to go out by; and, to cap the climax of his happiness, he ran up against the waiting-woman, at a hundred paces from the house, as she was coming in.

She beamed with joy on seeing him, and cried out:

'Oh, M. Biscaros! how pat you have arrived! This makes two days that my young lady has been sighing after you. She said you would not come, and when she spied you in M. de Caussade's carriage, she was so glad! But you will not see her before evening, at dinner. She is so afraid of meeting that big lily-faced viscount.'

'Perhaps she is not wrong in being afraid of him,' said Aurélien. 'He was just now out for a walk with Mdlle. de Briouze, and——'

'Good! So you had a peep at them from upstairs, eh? Then you must have seen me also?'

'Yes; and I was looking for you.'

'To ask me what they were talking about, of course? I did not miss a word of it; but I would rather not repeat what I heard—it was too vile.'

'Yet I must know. We two will not be any too many to protect Mdlle. Nicole; for I am sure they were speaking of her, and mean mischief to her.'

'Right you are, as far as that goes; more mischief than you dream of; but they will not succeed in doing it to her. I alone will prevent it. If you meddle with it, there will be misfortune. Men are no use in these matters. They do not know anything but how to fight.'

'What do you mean? Fight?'

'That will do. I understand myself, and I beg you to let me work my own way. If I need you, I shall know where to find you.'

'Do you fear they will attack your mistress? If that be so, your duty is to warn her father, and tell me what is going on.'

'I shall not even warn my young lady; it is not worth the trouble of alarming her, and I answer that nothing will befall her.'

Biscaros could not make head or tail of this refusal of the abigail's, and to extract at least a clue, he suddenly said:

'Was that a weapon which Mdlle. de Briouze handed to M. de Saint-Osvin?'

'Oh!' ejaculated Bernadette, 'did you see that? But keep cool; it was neither dagger nor pistol.'

'What was it, then?'

'If I were to tell you, the cat would be out of the bag; and that must not be. I have my plan, and you would only spoil it; whilst, if you keep quiet, I vow to you that nothing will befall my young lady, and they will not try it again.'

Biscaros began to believe that the Cadichonne was making too much of herself, and that she had

heard only meaningless chatter. He despaired, anyhow, of drawing anything from her, and he was going to leave her, when she resumed enthusiastically:

'Mark you, M. Aurélien! you cannot understand how I love my young lady. I love Pierre, but not as much. By the same token, if Pierre knew what I am going to do for her, he would not be pleased, I believe; but he will not know, and it would be all the same to me if he did. When he becomes my husband, he will have to get used to me acting to please myself alone.'

'Pierre, you say; is he here?'

'No; he has remained at the Truc de la Truque, whence he will not budge until I return from Paris.'

'Do you believe that? His father told me, though, that he was going to give him the money to travel to Paris.'

'Money! where will that poor beggar get money? He has never had two francs in his hovel at the same time.'

'You are making a mistake. He has saved up some gold pieces.'

'Did you see them?'

'No; but La Chamade is incapable of lying, and——'

'The old fellow is in his dotage. If he has any gold in an old stocking, he would have had to steal it, and he is an honest man. But let us drop that, M. Aurélien; I am going up to my young

lady's. I must arrange with her about this evening's work, for it would not come off by itself. Are you going to sleep at Mensignac?'

'Probably; but——'

'Well, as true as Bernadette is speaking to you, there will be news in the morning, and you will not be sorry for having stayed; with which, I am off. Do not tell anybody that you have been talking with me.'

She started at a run for the house, and entered it before Biscaros had time to stay her.

She left him deeply perplexed and puzzled, for he had not comprehended much of her enigmatical speech. He well enough guessed that Mdlle. de Briouze and the viscount had concerted on some evil trick to play Nicole; but that was all he foresaw. What had they plotted? and how did Bernadette expect to preserve her young mistress from their snare? Biscaros could not surmise.

He was also astonished to hear Bernadette assert that Father La Chamade had not a penny. He wondered if the lonely cottager of Arcachon Forest might not have waylaid some wayfarer to procure the funds to defray his son's expenses in the great capital, where the resin-gatherers of the Landes rarely appear.

But the murder of Gémozac was already ancient history, and Biscaros thought much less of the past than of the present and the future.

He went down into the dining-room, where he found his friend Caussade doing justice to the

castle cookery, in company with some country squires blessed with hearty appetites.

Fernand was conspicuous by his absence. Perhaps he was preparing for some shady expedition. The marquis passed his mornings with his horses; his elder daughter never left her rooms during the day; and Bernadette had just announced to Aurélien that Mdlle. Nicole would not appear until the dinner-hour.

Biscaros had, therefore, long hours before him to make ready for this evening of country-house life, which was, perhaps, going to count in his existence; for all the characters whom chance had recently mingled with it would be gathered then in the drawing-room.

Bernadette had told him enough for him to foresee that the decisive hour approached, and that a drama would be played that night at Mensignac in which he would take no part, if the waiting-woman were to be believed.

At least, he wished to be on the alert for any emergency, and he promised himself to keep apart until evening, in order not to be distracted by unforeseen events from the thoughts which entirely engrossed him.

Still, he could not evade breakfasting at the same table as Caussade and four other guests, who did not fail to relate long hunting-stories, and compliment him on the capital shot to which Mdlle. de Briouze owed her life. But, after having satisfied their appetite, these gentlemen went off for

coffee in the billiard-room, where they began an interminable series of canons, so that Aurélien could go up to his room again.

He shut himself up there, and passed the day in a brown study, for so far nothing made him pleased with this change of residence, to which he had only consented in order to obey Nicole's appeal.

Under his eyes he had the dance-tablets, and more than once he kissed the page whereon she had written, 'Come, save me !'

He had come, but he had not been able yet to exchange a word with the maiden in distress.

On the other hand, he had fallen again under the dark lady's talons, and by the spirit of mischief interfering, he had saved her from a certain death.

It was not assuredly with this intention he had undertaken his trip into Périgord.

To complete the list of mischances, he had met this Viscount de Saint-Osvin, who had with impunity tried to get rid of him, and who was, no doubt, ruminating abominable projects.

It was really too much bad luck ; and he questioned whether it might not be better to throw up the dangerous part he played, almost despite himself.

But there was Nicole, who hoped in him alone, and he could not and would not give up his post of champion to the foes conjoined to ruin her. He would have blushed to beat a retreat when Berna-

dette, only a lady's-maid, risked losing her place and her lover to defend her mistress.

Moreover, the situation would not be long clearing up, whether from the marquis, evilly prompted by his unworthy friend, dismissing the Cadichonne, or light opening his eyes and inducing him to drive away the Fascinating Fernand who hovered like a wasp between the two flowers, his daughters.

This heartrending alternative would probably be ended next day.

These reflections occupied Aurélien's mind until the hour when he had to dress to go down to dinner.

He was startled out of them by Caussade, who had changed his apparel, and who had been trying on the spot to make sure about the Viscount de Saint-Osvin's matrimonial intentions.

Caussade said that he had cunningly questioned M. de Briouze, and he swore, by all the gods and little fishes, that there was no idea of the nonsensical project.

He added that Nicole, not being very well, had not come out of her rooms all day, and had seen nobody there save her father.

This was consoling for Aurélien, who had for an instant thought of attempting to meet her, and had regretted his being mewed up in his room instead of rambling in the house or the grounds.

He would see her at dinner, and find an occasion to speak to her, either during or after it.

He only half believed in friend Caussade's assertions, for he saw everything rose-coloured ; but they calmed his disquietude a little, and he was in an excellent condition of mind when he went down to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EVE OF THE PLOT.

DOLORES was already enthroned there, playing the hostess, rather overloaded with diamonds from her mother's casket, but very lovely ; she tolerated two rural guests, who overwhelmed her with antiquated compliments.

The others surrounded the marquis, accustomed to their style, and they descanted on agriculture, of which he understood not a whit.

The Fascinating Fernand kept aloof, managing to draw near to Mdlle. Nicole, who was seated a little one side.

Biscaros' entrance modified the arrangement of the knots a trifle. Mdlle. de Briouze rose, came to him, and again thanked him for having saved her life. The guests chimed in as chorus, and soon the deliverer stood as centre of a circle where a dozen voices were vaunting his skill and coolness.

He modestly cut short the concert of laudation by begging M. de Briouze kindly to present him to his younger daughter.

This was an indispensable formality, for the interview at the Periwinkles Châlet in the presence of a police-inspector could not be reckoned as an introduction ; and the marquis performed it with the best grace in the world.

But the viscount was by, and his presence not only chilled the Gascon, but Nicole, who showed more blushes than eloquence.

Our good Caussade struck up with a merry note. He set to narrating sporting anecdotes, peppered with Munchausen touches, which made everybody laugh ; and when a footman announced that 'M. le Marquis' was served, all were in a joyous mood, except Nicole, who had been obliged to accept M. de Saint-Osvin's arm.

Mdlle. de Briouze had the boldness to take Aurélien's, though there was a counsellor-general there still more worthy of precedence by his age than by his political standing and his large landed estate.

These two pairings-off, evidently premeditated by her, were equivalent to a declaration of her preference and her design.

She imposed her half-sister upon the viscount, and she reserved Aurélien to be seated on her left hand—for she dared not place him on her right.

She invented a jest in order to recall that he was also on her heart-side when the boar rushed up at her, and the guests applauded this happy remembrance.

Biscaros became morose again, looked at Nicole,

who did not lift her eyes, and prepared to receive the charges of his hostess, intending to repulse them in such a way as to discourage her.

The dinner commenced badly. Not to the diners' thinking—rustic gentlemen far from tired of the luxurious refinement of Parisian *cuisine* and English waiting. They plied the fork with gusto and drank heartily, so that, by the help of the wine, the conversation did not lag. It became general, and nothing could better favour little by-speeches ; but to the great vexation of Mdlle. de Briouze, who had reckoned strongly on resuming with Biscaros the tender colloquy interrupted in the Forest of Arcachon by a tourists' cavalcade, it happened that the old counsellor-general was talkative and gallant.

This annoying neighbour opened fire with ridiculous compliments, and she was obliged to reply, whether she liked it or not, for he did not let her take breath a minute.

She tried hard to fan up a more tender conversation on her left, but Aurélien lent himself badly to it, and the pitiless counsellor-general seized her again every time she attempted to escape him.

Whilst Aurélien eluded her with an almost impolite persistency, Nicole opposed a freezing coolness to the cordiality of the Viscount de Saint-Osvin. But the latter was not to be disconcerted by so little, and he was never more amiable.

Mdlle. de Briouze approved him with glances, and her father, who thought it was her sister's

behaviour which she was commending, was astonished to see her troubling herself about one for whom she had shown little kindness heretofore.

Caussade, placed at the other end of the table, also observed the viscount's demeanour, and he began to believe that Biscaros was not wrong about the secret intentions of this mercenary Lovelace.

The honest guests saw nothing, and they did not feel dull at table. They would have remained there to an unseemly hour, had not the marquis given his daughters the cue, and they rising, the gentlemen rose also to go into the smoking-room.

To return to the drawing-room, Mdlle. de Briouze this time took the arm of the landed proprietor who had so worried her, and M. de Briouze led out his younger daughter, who had come to him as if to put herself under his protection.

The guests had the politeness to wait a little before they went out to their cigars, and in the drawing-room occurred one of those lulls when persons, delighted by an excellent repast, mingle and group themselves around the host and some of their number.

To his keen annoyance, the viscount was pounced upon by two or three gentlemen, who stormed him with questions about fast life in Paris, where they did not often go.

Aurélien took refuge by the piano, and from the distance regarded Mdlle. Nicole, who spoke

with her father as they gradually edged up to the doorway.

Her half-sister was imprisoned by a ring of complimentary worshippers.

Aurélien profited by the chance to go and place himself by the door towards which Nicole came after her father had kissed her in parting salute.

He hoped that she would not go out without bestowing on him one passing word.

It was full time for Nicole to speak to him, for since he had arrived at Mensignac, whither she had summoned him, it was with difficulty that she had exchanged with him a few commonplaces at the moment when her father presented him.

They met in a singular position. They loved—they knew they loved one another, and yet they had not been able to say so, or even to come to an understanding about the dangers menacing them.

Aurélien had been only informed by the Cadichonne and very imperfectly, too; for she had bounded herself to apprising him that Fernand the Handsome and the bewitching Dolores were hatching an evil plot.

This time he had the joy of hearing the fair girl whisper, before leaving the room:

'Seven, to-morrow morning, at the end of the park avenue. I shall be there!'

At last he would have the opportunity freely to express his sentiments and know hers.

This was much, yet it was not enough; for if

Bernadette were credible, the night would not go by without Nicole having need of protection against those who wished to destroy her.

What was the nature of this peril she incurred? Biscaros could not guess it. He did not even know why Nicole retired so early.

It was the marquis who took it on himself to explain it. He held him amicably by the arm as he said:

'The heat and chatter have indisposed her. She is going to rest. I do not suggest you should do the like; but I do beg you to excuse these honest folk, who have not been able to entertain you much. They will be going home to-night. To-morrow we shall be a party of friends; and when I shall have the pleasure of receiving you in Paris, you will find more agreeable company under my roof. Meanwhile, you are not obliged to follow them into the smoking-room and billiard-room. If you are fond of whist, we might play Saint-Osvin with a dummy. Only I must notify you that he is a first-class player.'

'That is too much for me, as I am a poor player,' replied Aurélien, far from disposed to sit at the same table as he hero of the suspicious dice.

'Then I shall have a game of piquet with him. You might turn over the leaves to Dolores, who will sing you some real Spanish songs; not at all such shams as the "Habañero," and that sort of thing. She owes you this compensation for not being able to attend to you at table, to her deep

regret, and by reason of the garrulity of her other neighbour.'

This arrangement did not at all draw smiles from Biscaros, and he made up his mind to steal away, as well as he could, without being rude.

The spell which the viscount had cast over the marquis began to worry him.

Pretending he had to say a word to his friend Caussade, he went over to join him, whilst the marquis approached Saint-Osvin, who was chatting familiarly with Mdlle. de Briouze.

Caussade was a billiard-player, and thought only of canons. So Biscaros looked on whilst smoking a cigar; and when he returned to the drawing-room, he found the host sitting at table with the Handsome Fernand, before a very high game of *rubicon*. The point was five francs, and the run of luck, as it always did, turned towards Saint-Osvin.

To the great astonishment of Aurélien, Dolores had taken a place beside her father, and seemed interested in his hand. She kept the game with a pencil, and uttered an exclamation when she had to record a success for the viscount. Her protests disturbed her father, and his opponent always profited by his little oversights.

What was she aiming at? This was Aurélien's question. But he could not warn the old nobleman of his being tricked, under penalty of exciting an outburst, which he had many reasons for wanting to avoid that night.

Dolores did not appear to perceive that the Gascon was near.

The whole was past deciphering.

The course Biscaros took was to glide away gently.

He had other cares than to catch the swindler, and the presentiment of impending events affected him more than this ignoble deception upon a hoodwinked dupe.

On going up to his room, he perceived Bernadette preceding him upon the stairs, but not waiting for him to overtake her. On reaching the first-floor, he saw her trip along a lengthy corridor and open a door, in all likelihood that of her young mistress's apartments.

This lobby crossed the whole flat, and all the rooms opened upon it.

Biscaros entered his own, and shut himself up in his bedroom, although he had no intention of going to bed. He foresaw a late visit from Caussade, and fearing to be disturbed by this over-zealous friend, he extinguished his light to make him believe he was asleep.

This he did not think of. He opened the door slightly, and listened there.

At the end of an hour he heard wheels: the guests were driving off home.

Then came Caussade into the sitting-room, and he, after having knocked at the door of communication without having received any response, went tranquilly to lie down.

Lastly, steps and voices on the staircase be-

tokened that the master of the house was coming up to his room.

The passage was thoroughly lighted, and from his ambuscade Biscaros could see that the marquis was escorting his elder daughter.

The viscount was closely following them, and a colloquy was going on, of which the Gascon did not lose a word.

'Upon my word, my dear Fernand,' said the marquis, 'you are too lucky. You won fourteen hundred points, and yet I play better than you. I owe you three hundred and fifty louis. You will not catch me at it again.'

'Winners first, losers last,' replied Saint-Osvin, looking at Mdlle. de Briouze sarcastically. 'Better luck next time, or with another player.'

'The scoundrel!' thought Biscaros, stung to the heart by so much impudence. 'He is not satisfied with deceiving and robbing this gentleman of his money, but he must jest with him about his designs on his family honour. What a woman this to help on the treachery!'

Biscaros was not at the end of his astonishment. He saw the father and daughter exchange a smile and a caress, and separate to enter their respective rooms.

The least Judas-like daughter could not have acted more filially.

Dolores had attained her goal, and she must have had good reasons to bring her unloved suitor under the roof where his unloving intended reposed.

Fernand strolled away tranquilly after wishing his host good-night.

He was lodged in the front, on the other side of the corridor from Dolores, and he went straight in.

All seemed to be over, and yet Biscaros' presentiment held him in his post of observation.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, two footmen came and put out the grand-staircase light, and lighted up two ground-glass globes in the lobby.

It was not very far off from midnight, and the servants were retiring.

Did the master of the Château and his guests already sleep? The contrary might be surmised, and Aurélien waited, resolved to do so until daylight, if need be, so thoroughly convinced was he that the night would not pass over without events.

His patience was rewarded.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DRAG ON THE WHEEL.

TEN minutes had not elapsed before he saw defined on the dark background of the passage a black shape, which walked slowly and noiselessly as phantoms do.

It came towards him, and when it passed under one of the lamps hung on the wall he saw it was a woman.

Not Dolores, surely. She was tall, and this noctambulist was short and stout.

A servant, perhaps; some scullery-maid stealing out to meet a turnspit boy, said Biscaros to himself at the first; but no, she was dressed in black silk, and wore on her head a high tortoiseshell comb under a lace mantilla.

This Andalusian costume made him remember that Mdlle. de Briouze had a duenna in her service, originally in her mother's household at Granada, *la tia* Carmen—'Aunt Carmen,' as they say in Spain, where every elderly woman is a *tia* and every old man a *tio*.

He had seen her once or twice waiting for her

mistress on the Casino terrace of Arcachon, and he recognised her wrinkled face, stump of a nose, and hairy chin.

Where, at such an hour, could this dreadful companion, with feline movements, of the wicked half-sister be going?

Ferocious beasts prowl about at night only to seek prey. Had this one stolen forth to strangle Nicole?

For an instant Biscaros was tempted to believe so; for he saw her creep up to the suite of rooms where Bernadette had entered half an hour previously.

Perhaps the duenna had a key for it; but Biscaros recovered a little heart on thinking how this horrible hag, if she cherished evil designs, would meet someone to challenge her, since the waiting-maid was there.

But Tia Carmen did not try to open it. She was content to apply her ear to the door and listen.

Without doubt she heard nothing, for, after a tolerably long pause, she rose up and retraced her way, walking on tiptoe.

This spying evidently had an object. Biscaros was not, therefore, much astonished to see her stop at the end of the passage, and tap at the door of Fascinating Fernand's room. Almost instantly he showed himself on the threshold, and opened a colloquy in an undertone with the Andalusian.

The conference was short.

The duenna once more retraced her steps, and went up the main stairs leading to the second story; but she only mounted a dozen steps.

Biscaros, who could see nothing more of her, heard her cough five minutes after, and divined that she was hovering about there in ambuscade, whilst awaiting some event she had prepared.

What event?

In all likelihood the execution of a plot woven by Mdlle. de Briouze and her accomplice.

Biscaros need only to have shown himself to put the spy to flight and prevent the viscount from coming forth, on the alert as he would be. But he wished to catch them in the very act; and so he kept quiet, for the time being, without ceasing to peer through the opening.

Ere long he saw Saint-Osvin appear, advancing by skirting the passage-wall. On his way by, he waved his hand to the hag who was perched above him on the stairs.

The drama was growing exciting, and the sequel was at hand.

On arriving before the door where the duenna had paused to listen, Saint-Osvin drew a key from his pocket, inserted it in the keyhole, and opened the door cautiously. He entered and closed the door without noise.

Biscaros had not foreseen this. He stood petrified, and, it must be confessed, he lost his head. He forgot that, from his window, he had seen Mdlle. de Briouze hand the viscount an object which he

had not been able to distinguish ; and now it flashed upon his mind that this man was in concert with Nicole.

There was no common-sense in the supposition ; but Biscaros was in no mood to reason, still less take an immediate step, in presence of this unheard-of fact.

For him also to enter the young lady's apartments, or even to call up the house, would be to bring about an exposure which would ruin the unfortunate girl's reputation, whether she were guilty or not.

Of two things, one would happen, he thought : she would not raise an alarm, and this would be a proof that Saint-Osvin was not paying her the visit without her permission ; or, on the contrary, she would call out for help. And then, having no more considerations to study, he might run to deliver her from the villain, even though he had to break down the door.

He had also forgotten that Bernadette had not come out of Mdlle. de Briouze's rooms, and that Tia Carmen remained on the stairs.

Had Biscaros been otherwise prompted, and entered behind the intruder, he would sooner have had the explanation of this mystery.

He would have seen the scoundrel grope his way in an antechamber, barely illumined by the feeble glow of a night-light.

The suite was composed of three rooms, one

leading into another; at the back of the first, into which the villain had glided, there was a lounge.

He had neglected to learn about the field of his manœuvres before he entered upon his scandalous adventure, and, confused by seeing the couch, he believed he had reached the bedroom.

He doubted it still less when he heard the regular breathing of a sleeper.

He had attained the abominable goal. Whatever happened, the result would be the same: Nicole's fair fame blemished, and the two accomplices had taken their measures to that end.

It was not for nothing that the duenna had mounted guard, and the fop come out in battle array—we mean, in a dressing-gown of stylish cut and dazzling hue, so that his evil design would be emblazoned to those who caught him.

He knew thoroughly that he would be caught, as he had settled with the villainous Carmen for her to intervene at the fit moment by running to notify the Marquis de Briouze that a man had entered his younger daughter's rooms.

Thence would ensue the enforced marriage, advised by the unnatural Dolores.

Her worthy associate was terribly self-conceited, but he had never met a victim of Nicole de Briouze's mettle.

However, he advanced noiselessly, and was stretching out his hand, when a woman, lying dressed upon the lounge, sprang up, throwing off a counterpane, and stood before him.

Notwithstanding his coolness and his audacity, Saint-Osvin drew back alarmed.

He had never seen Bernadette, who had only been two months in Nicole's service, and he could not understand at first who this girl was, dressed and capped like a Cadichonne.

But he very quickly recovered from his surprise, and he comprehended that he was confronted by the waiting-maid pointed out to him by Mdlle. de Briouze as an enemy with whom he would have to deal.

Saint-Osvin was not the man to be disconcerted by such a trifle. By experience, he knew how to tame servants, and he thought to get rid of her with a few pieces of gold.

He went through the comic pantomime of diving into his pocket, where he would have found nothing, for he had not thought of purchasing the good graces of a nobleman's daughter with lucre, but Bernadette checked him, saying:

'That's useless. Such means do not trap me. I know why you have sneaked in here, and I bid you do me the pleasure of clearing out this very minute!'

She spoke without raising her voice, no doubt from fear of arousing Mdlle. Nicole from her repose in her own chamber, separated by a large dressing-room from that into which the viscount had penetrated.

He was furious, and not at all disposed to obey her injunction. He saw the surprise had failed,

and yet he did not despair of gaining his ends; but he changed his direction of fire.

'Come, come, my lass,' he said coaxingly, 'you are too pretty to be a bear. You must have guessed that I wanted a chat with you. I saw you come up the stairs, and I counted on finding you here. But I did not know your young lady was at hand——'

'None of your familiarity, I bid you!' interrupted the faithful watcher. 'I would not look at you if you offered me all California. I have a sweetheart ever so much better-looking than you, and he has not got hair the colour of tow, either. He'd punch your nose if he heard you. You'd better take care not to run up against him; but once more I tell you—be off out of here!'

'Not before we make friends, darling,' replied Saint-Osvin, without moving. 'Why don't you marry your sweetheart? I can offer you a marriage portion—fifty louis to commence with—if you will only come to my room where my pocket-book is.'

'You're a blackguard!'

'Pooh! you may insult me as much as you like! You had better give in, or it will be the worse for you!'

After cajolery, menaces—but one was hardly more real than the other; the viscount did not care what the Cadichonne decided on doing, for he was following his scheme, and that was to gain time.

It was agreed with the duenna that she was to strike in at the nick of time.

Biscaros, who had not budged from his post of observation, could not catch a single word of this edifying dialogue, and he thought with horror of Nicole consenting to listen to this man. Surely she had had ten times leisure enough to cry out.

But if he heard nothing, he could see what went on in the corridor, and he was distracted from his painful reflections by an unexpected sight.

The duenna reappeared in the lobby.

She had made up her mind to come down the stairs where she had stood as sentry, but she stopped an instant to listen; then, no doubt having heard nothing, she proceeded to the farther end of the passage.

This time she did not walk with caution. On the contrary, she seemed trying to make a noise: she almost ran, and the floor cracked under her heavy tread.

Why did she hasten thus, after having kept perfect immobility during three-quarters of an hour?

Had she become tired of watching, and was she simply going back to her room to repose after the fatigue of this nocturnal excursion?

So many questions did Biscaros put to himself without yet being in a state to solve them.

Soon he saw her stop before the door of Mdlle. de Briouze's room and thump on it, crying out, '*Señorita Dolores!*' and at the marquis's door opposite she behaved in the same manner, calling, '*Señor Marques!*'

Biscaros understood matters less and less, though

he had a smattering of Spanish, like most natives of Bordeaux.

The superiors whom she called made the duenna wait a rather long while, during which she did not cease knocking and calling.

At length one door opened partly, and the marquis showed himself in a dressing-gown. He had been abed, no doubt, and had taken the time to don some apparel before he answered the harridan's noisy appeals.

'What's this uproar about?' he demanded rather roughly, 'and why do you presume to knock me up? Is the house on fire?'

The 'aunt' replied in Castillian, a language M. de Briouze had studied in Spain, and more particularly after his marriage there, but he had never managed to master it; and his daughter came out opportunely to be his interpreter.

She was also in a loose wrap, and her hair was hastily caught up.

She questioned the attendant in Spanish, and lifted her hands in distress and astonishment.

'Carmen asserts that she saw a man go into my sister's rooms,' said she, translating the reply.

'The woman's mad!' returned the marquis angrily. 'The plate is not kept under Nicole's wing. Rather ask the cat why she is rambling after midnight in the passages, and order her in my name to go to bed and leave us in repose.'

'She says that, not feeling well, she got up to go down to the kitchen to make some tea for herself,

when, on reaching the end of this passage, she saw a man open the door of Nicole's apartments and enter there ten minutes ago, where he still would be.'

'And she waited all this time to warn us? She lies! But, whether she does or not, she deserves dismissal.'

'Why, father, she thinks she has acted properly —the affair is serious enough for you to take the trouble to verify her error; or if, by some misfortune——'

'I should hope you do not suppose that your sister has no courage, and would be daunted into silence by a thief?'

'A thief? humph! but then, she may be in danger! and instead of arguing here, had you not better go and see that she is not struggling with a malefactor?'

These words did not arrive very distinctly to Biscaros' ears, but by the gestures he fairly made out what was debated, and light began to beam on his mind.

The detestable duenna must have been directed by her accomplice and mistress to warn her master when Saint-Osvin should have disappeared. She must have counted the minutes.

'You are right,' resumed the marquis. 'Come along, my dear child. If Carmen is playing a jest upon us, I will discharge her on the spot, and it is as well that you should be by to translate my order to her.'

'As you please, papa.'

M. de Briouze led the procession towards his younger daughter's rooms; the women following without being urged, having both sound reasons not to miss seeing the next act, which they anticipated.

Seeing the party come, Biscaros drew a little back, but still he held his door ajar in order to overhear the explanation impending between the different characters in this domestic drama.

The marquis did not stand on the order of his going in: he did not knock. The key was in the lock where Saint-Osvin had intentionally left it after having used it, in the same way as he had left the bolt inside unshot.

His design was to be caught on the spot. M. de Briouze had no difficulty in consequence in entering, and he found himself face to face with the viscount.

'Wretch!' he cried out, as he raised his fist.

Saint-Osvin caught his arm, and said with unruffled calmness:

'I am not so guilty as you think, Henri; and, any way, I am ready to repair any harm done.'

'That's the proper language,' muttered Mdlle. de Briouze in an undertone, as if prompting a reply to her father.

But he was infuriated, and he exclaimed:

'What do you mean by repairing harm? Do you dare assert that my daughter expected you, and that she must wed you to redeem her fault?'

'I am at your orders,' responded the Fascinating Fernand.

'My orders? I have none to give you. I have only to execute justice upon the unhappy child who has sullied my name, and the unworthy friend who has abused my confidence. Perhaps I shall do you the honour of fighting with you; but she, I'll go and see her! Stand aside, monsieur! Let me pass to her, since she dare not show herself.'

'Oh, father, I supplicate you to be calm!' murmured Dolores. 'Think of the consequences of an act of violence, and also that no harm is done, since M. de Saint-Osvin asks you for the hand of Nicole, whom he loves, and who loves him.'

'That is not true! and were it so, I'd rather see her dead than wedded to him! Give me room, I tell you!' cried out M. de Briouze, roughly shoving the viscount aside, so that he had to yield the passage-way.

All at once Bernadette emerged from the shadow where she had been standing.

'Have a care, M. le Marquis,' said she, laying a finger on her lips; 'my young lady sleeps. If you keep on talking in a high voice you will awaken her.'

'What are you doing here?' challenged the old noble.

'I came to see if I was wanted. I tapped at the door of her room and tried to open it softly, but I could not. Mademoiselle had locked herself in. Before retiring she told me that, as I could not

do anything for her, she would fasten herself in. She hoped to have a good sound sleep until morning.'

'Then you have not seen her?'

'I have only seen this gentleman.'

'Then it was you opened the door to him?'

'No. He entered without asking my leave. He says he noticed me passing along on the stairs, and he followed me without my suspecting it. Here he has been talking rubbish to me for ten minutes; it did not catch me, but I was not able to get rid of him. It was very nice of you to come in and save me, M. le Marquis. I was going to cry out "Fire" and "Thieves." I am only a poor servant, but I am an honest girl, and I never listen to these barber's-block gentlemen.'

'Is what this girl says true?' demanded M. de Briouze, fixedly looking at Saint-Osvin.

Biscaros knew how things stood from this moment forward. He divined that the abigail lied in order to keep Mdlle. de Briouze out of the matter; for, informed as she was upon the viscount's real project, she could not have been made to believe that he offered money to buy her affection. But the Gascon wondered how the viscount would answer the decisive question put to him by the marquis.

So did Mdlle. de Briouze await this answer; but she relied on Saint-Osvin, without formally accusing Nicole of making an appointment with him, leaving it to be supposed that she was in concord with him.

She was completely mistaken.

Saint-Osvin had had time to reflect since the commcenement of this scene, which was not turning out according to his confederate's wishes, thanks to Bernadette's intervention. He saw that the shot had missed, and that he must beat a retreat skilfully if he did not wish to be embroiled with his powerful patron.

Briouze had just declared that he would rather see his pet child dead than give her in marriage to him. This was clear; and Fernand the Handsome had no more interest in compromising Nicole, since he could no longer hope to marry her.

'Answer! why do you not answer?' cried out the marquis.

'What do you want me to answer?' returned Saint-Osvin, shrugging his shoulders. 'Why do you have such a pretty girl in your household? I was wrong to follow her so far; but I thought it was her own room. After all, a man is not made of wood—my crime does not deserve hanging.'

Eager to believe his daughter above attack, and forgetting the ominous words at the opening of this episode, M. de Briouze's clouded face brightened; but his daughter's turned pale with ire, and if her eyes could have flashed lightning, the confederate who so cowardly abandoned her cause would not have outlived that minute.

'Allow me, my dear Henri,' went on the hypocrite, with rare impudence, 'to tell you that you are too hasty in accusing me of infamy. You

ought to know me better. I have never prided myself on being a saint, but, hang it all! I have always respected your daughters, and you have cruelly wounded me by attributing I can hardly understand what shameful designs to me.'

'Forgive me, my dear Fernand,' said the hoodwinked nobleman, holding out his hand to the abominable scoundrel.

This was really carrying blind trust too far, and very little would have brought Biscaros out of his room to say to the credulous noble:

'Kick the rogue out of doors! fling his accomplice after him! He is a general nuisance—he tricks at cards; he made love to Mdlle. de Briouze before persecuting her sister; he attempted to assassinate me; and they are in combination to ruin you, he and this false daughter.'

But it would have been a badly-chosen moment to unmask them, and his intervention would in all likelihood have had no other effect than to close the doors of M. de Briouze's house upon him.

He had better constrain himself, and hold his powers in reserve for the future.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CAMPAIGN OPENS.

NICOLE was safe, and her father had so flatly laid down his law as regarded a marriage with Saint-Osvin, that she no longer had anything to fear in that quarter. But she was not in shelter from her half-sister's persecution, exasperated as she was by the non-success of her odious project, and she only had Biscaros and her maid to defend her.

They might be enough, provided they fought side by side, and were not banished by Dolores' influence over her father; she would not have failed doing this if the Gascon had come forward to warn the marquis.

Fernand the Fascinating allowed himself to shake the proffered hand, whilst assuming the air of an offended friend. Anyone would have believed that he expected an apology.

The old noble did not go so far as that, and he cut the situation short, more painful than ridiculous as it was, by saying:

'Let us forget all this, my dear fellow, and leave here. Most fortunately, Nicole has seen and heard

nothing. She must always remain ignorant of what has happened. Do you hear me, Bernadette?'

'Quite clearly, M. le Marquis,' replied the lady's-maid. 'There is no danger of my saying one word to my mistress.'

'You will do well, then. One slip, and it will cost you your place.'

'And if any blunder is made, it could only come from you, for I answer for Carmen,' sharply added Mdlle. de Briouze.

With a touch of his hand to his lips, Saint-Osvin protested that he would be mute, for which the dark lady bestowed on him a glance of contempt.

Bernadette was already at the foot of the stairway, which she had to ascend to go to her own room.

On an order given in Spanish by her mistress, the duenna made an old-fashioned curtsy, and vanished noiselessly.

The viscount escorted the master of the house and his daughter to their room doors, ceremoniously bowed each in, and slunk away to his own resting-place, rather chapfallen.

By a quarter of an hour subsequently it would seem that everybody was sleeping profoundly.

But Biscaros was awake—and he was not the only one.

He had made up his mind not to go to bed, in order to arrive first at the tryst given him by Nicole.

This ardently-longed-for interview was almost

dreaded by him, for he began to despair of the future.

Since his arrival at Mensignac, he had been able to measure not only the obstacles separating him from Nicole, but also the dangers the poor girl ran in persisting in loving him.

Now he understood the character of her half-sister, and of what she was capable when passion swept her onward.

This was the case. She would commit crime to remove hindrance and obtain her ends.

A woman capable of conceiving and organizing the infernal machination just baffled, would not hesitate to suppress a burdensome rival, such as Nicole was, to her fancy, for Biscaros.

The life of an innocent girl was no more precious than that of the unfortunate Gémozac, whose tragical death had not drawn a solitary tear from Dolores.

Perchance Nicole might have the courage to dare these perils; but they had to be understood, and Aurélien's duty was to exhibit them to her, vowing to devote himself to preserve her from them.

He would have liked to tell Nicole the truth. But how could he, without offending her delicacy, speak of her elder sister's doings, and the ignoble compact she had concluded with the vilest of men —this noble viscount of all iniquity?

Yet it had to be done, and Biscaros employed the rest of the eventful night in preparing for it.

He was ready long before the hour, and his neighbour Caussade was still a-bed when he went down and out into the park, after taking care to light a cigar, so as to make anyone whom he might

meet believe that it was his custom to go out at dawn and smoke.

'At the end of the avenue,' Nicole had said. This was slightly vague; but he thought this meant the long linden walk where the viscount had been strolling with Mdlle. de Briouze in the evening; and he was not wrong.

Almost at the end of the park there was a long green, a bowling-green, as our fathers called such places, with side screens of foliage, and boughs almost meeting overhead to form a ceiling.

There he found Nicole de Briouze. She had been an earlier riser than he. It was plain that she had not slept any better, for she was extremely pale, and her eyes were drooping.

'You must think poorly of me,' she began, holding out a burning hand, which he did not dare kiss. 'What would they not say if you were seen here with me? But little do I care, when I must learn if I can depend on you.'

As Biscaros was about to enlarge upon his devotedness, she proceeded:

'Do not tell me that you love me—I know that, and I love you. But promise me to do what I am going to ask you.'

'I swear I will!'

'Well, I ask you to go away.'

'Go!' repeated the stupefied hearer.

'Yes, this day, this very morning. If you remain another day at Mensignac, that man will kill you. He tried yesterday, for an old keeper saw him shoot at you. He will try again, and not miss. I want you to live. When you are in Paris, I shall not tremble for you.'

'And I shall see you no more!'

'You will see me there. My father will welcome you. If he should not, I shall find some way. Bernadette will help me. Ah! there's one we may confide in. But, I beseech you, quit this accursed château—to-morrow it will be too late.'

'Why, then, did you call me to you?' sadly murmured Biscaros.

'When I wrote you to come, I did not know what I do now. Do not ask any explanation of me, for I can give you none; but do not fear anything for me. Bernadette will guard me, and she will know how to defend me.'

'Bernadette! Has she told you?'

'All that she might tell me. Can I rely on your obeying me?'

'Yes; I will go, without taking leave of your father—or sister. I will find some excuse. I will charge M. de Caussade to say that I have been called to Paris by a telegram. But I do not promise you to leave the field free for that man.'

'Fight with him? risk your life? No, I won't have that. We shall be in Paris in a few days, where I will let you know what I expect from you. Hark!' she ejaculated precipitately; 'they come. Farewell, till we meet in Paris!'

Away she went at a run.

Biscaros, left alone, listened to the sound of approaching footsteps, and soon saw a gardener passing on the other side of the hedge with a rake on his shoulder.

There was no need for Mdlle. Nicole to have taken to flight, for this man would not have seen her, and Biscaros almost believed she was crazed.

The danger overhanging her was truly of a nature to trouble her mind, and the incoherent sentences she had uttered seemed to indicate that she had lost her wits.

But this only made her the more dear and touching to Biscaros, and this was not the crisis wherein to give up defending her.

Yet he comprehended that he had better not prolong his stay at Mensignac, where his presence would only sharpen Mdlle. de Briouze's jealousy; and he decided to start immediately for Paris, where he might expect orders to be brought him by the faithful Cadichonne.

So he returned to the château, where everybody was still slumbering, and aroused Caussade to announce his course, and beg him to aid him to pursue it.

He had expected objections; but Caussade raised none. He did not even inquire why Biscaros was so eager to get away.

Though unaware of what had happened in the night, Caussade had seen enough in the evening to understand that the fort was no longer tenable, and that his young friend did wisely in shunning the impassioned attacks of Mdlle. de Briouze.

It was arranged that Biscaros should take the Périgueux stage-coach daily passing the house, and that Caussade should make the best excuse he could for this hurried departure.

It was further agreed that they should meet at the Helder Hotel, where they were both in the habit of staying when they went to Paris, and that they should confer together on how to escape from a maze which grew more and more complicated.

Within the hour, our hero was on the way; and that same evening he took the express without having seen Caussade again, as the latter was no doubt retained at Mensignac by its master, or by the ladies, who might have explanations to ask of him.

The die was cast.

Forgetting his judicial mishap, Biscaros opened a perilous campaign against Dolores and her accomplice, without pondering over the issue of the unequal struggle.

His passing through Périgord was merely the prologue of the drama of which the acts were to be played in the Department of the Seine.

CHAPTER XV.

A KISS IN THE PARK.

Of all the public gardens which are green spots within the fortifications of Paris, the Parc Monceau is assuredly the most suitable to its present destination.

It has the advantage over others of having been laid out in olden times for the strolls of princes; and the municipal authorities who opened it to the public had little to do to transform it into a square, where children gambol under venerable trees.

The Tuileries Gardens wear a solemn aspect, which too strongly reminds the viewer of the great city in the heart of which it is situated.

The Luxembourg Gardens belong to the students. The Jardin des Plantes smells of the

scientific collections, and the Buttes-Chaumont Square is too near the Carrières de l'Amérique where vagabonds resort.

The Parc Monceau is the delight of the poor and aged. The scapegraces of life come here to be warmed gratis by the sun, on comfortable seats, and the blessed of this world find there the illusion of the country.

It is surrounded by residences which exclude neither light nor air, for they are barely perceived through the foliage, and the gardens in front of them blend seemingly with the broad public grounds, from which they are separated by palisades, almost invisible beneath the vines hiding them.

On this day, one of the first in the month of October, Pierre La Chamade sadly wandered in the park walks. He had not certainly come to taste the charms of a fine autumnal morning, for he was peering into the shadiest nooks and often stopped to examine the stylish fronts of the aristocratic mansions bordering the gardens on the side of the Van-Dyck Avenue.

His fellows, the resin-gatherers of the Forest of Arcachon, would have had some difficulty in recognising him under the attire he wore.

He had replaced his *Landaise* jacket by a cut-away coat bought at a cheap clothing warehouse, and his *beret* by a soft felt hat, which much annoyed him.

This new apparel suited him ill, but Pierre was still the well-made blade of the Peak of La Truque; and the nursemaids who were leading their infant charges in the gravel paths turned to ogle him when he passed.

Pierre had been in Paris only three days. He had wavered a long time before coming, though he died of longing to do so; for nothing consoled him for Bernadette's departure.

She had written to him twice from Mensignac to vow fidelity, and at the same time to forbid him to stir from his forest.

The letters were tender, but imperative. Bernadette did not want her sweetheart running about after her; and in the last one, in which she announced her start for Paris with her superiors, she had wickedly omitted to give her address.

This was the surest means of preventing him undertaking the forbidden journey.

At first, Pierre had resigned himself to remaining beside his father, and he perhaps would not have quitted him if Bernadette had continued to write to him, but she had abruptly ceased. He went every day to the Arcachon post-office, but the invariable reply was that there was nothing for him.

Unable to bear it any longer, he determined to go up to town by the cheapest service, carrying sixty gold pieces which Father La Chamade had taken out of a woollen stocking, and to which, in handing them over, he had added his blessing, precisely as in the old 'Harvest-Home' sort of dramas, with this difference, that the young forester was not going to town to make a fortune to redeem the heavily-mortgaged farm at home.

No; he went thither urged by love, which never goes far without jealousy; and on arriving at Paris he perceived, somewhat late, that it is not easy to discover a lady's-maid when her abode is not known.

He had clearly heard the girl say that the Marquis de Briouze lived by the Parc Monceau; but the clue was insufficient, and the idea never occurred to him of consulting the Directory where the nobleman's name would certainly figure.

He relied on hazard; and, in order to rank the chances on his side, he had taken lodgings in a house on the Courcelles Boulevard, facing the park.

In this low hotel he made inquiries, but the landlord did not know the nobility and gentry of the quarter; so that poor Pierre had passed his time since arrival in roving among the houses of the great people, without daring to go up to the porters' lodges to question them.

From morn to eve he was to be seen in the park or the adjoining streets, so that the policemen had remarked him, and began to eye him suspiciously.

But he was not disheartened. The natives of the Landes are patient, and this one had sworn to discover his sweetheart, even if he had to spend a year in seeking her in this immense metropolis, where he knew not a soul.

His resources would have permitted him to prolong his stay almost indefinitely, for he paid only fifteen francs a month for his room, and he dined at a boiled-beef house near at hand for six sous the plate of meat.

Old La Chamade's twelve hundred francs ensured his existence for a long time, and the very old Nick would have to intervene to prevent Pierre meeting his promised bride before he came to the end of his purse, or at least somebody who could give him news of her.

In his presence at the Peak, M. Biscaros had spoken to Bernadette of a proposed visit to M. de Briouze, and he might have come to Paris, as he only intended to pass through Bordeaux. Pierre knew this ; but he knew nothing farther, and to bring him face to face with this gentleman in a street of the Capital, as the rurals style it, a miracle was requisite on which he did not reckon at all.

Whilst awaiting chance to come to his aid, he left his lodgings at peep of day only to re-enter at dusk, after having counted all the trees in Monceau Park, where the sea-pine was conspicuous by its absence, and where he had a yearning to make incisions in the spruces and firs to see if they would yield resin.

He grew home-sick, and, if he had not been so fond of the Cadichonne, he would certainly have hurried back to the woodland, where his good old father would be sighing for his return.

Pierre was at this point on the third morning, when, from the seat where he was in the gardens, not far from the gilded iron palings of the Avenue Van-Dyck, he spied a woman whose appearance attracted his attention.

This woman had Bernadette's figure, but she was not dressed in her way.

On her shoulders was a shawl, and a real hat, fashioned by a milliner, was on her head, ornamented with a half-veil pulled down over her face, just like a Parisian lady wears one when going to keep an appointment.

Yet she walked very much like a woman of Bordeaux under the quinconces or in the walks of

Tourny. The step was brisk and firm, with a swing of the body quite southern.

Pierre speedily perceived that she was peeping at him through her veil, and his heart beat hard when he saw her stop before him instead of going on.

He leaped up as if moved by a spring, and was going to ask her what she wanted of him, when she said:

'Oh, you rascal! I've caught you!'

He nearly fell over backwards on recognising the voice and accent of the Cadichonne.

'What! is it you?' muttered the stupefied man.

'I should think it was me,' bluntly rejoined Bernadette. 'Were you going to pretend not to know me? That would not "wash," let me tell you.'

'But the shawl—the hat—they change you so.'

'I do not wear them for my own pleasure—particularly the hat. I feel as if a fireman's helmet were on my head; but it pleases my young lady. Her father would not keep me dressed as we do at La Teste, and the poor young lady did so want me! But never mind that. What did you come to Paris for?'

'To see you.'

'I forbade you, and you promised me not to budge.'

'I could not help it; I might have managed it if you had written to me.'

'Why, you had two letters from me—at Mensignac!'

'Yes; but not one from Paris.'

'And you imagined that I had dropped you? What a stupid you must be! What good would it

have been if I had written you? You could not have answered me, for I did not want to give you my address. I suspected you would fly off in some crazy fit if I did give it; and I was perfectly right, for you are here. You have come to spy about me. This is how you trust me! Well, my dearest, a lover who distrusts me does not suit me at all. And I tell you short that you can go back to the Truc de la Truque, and wait till I come to you. That will teach you to be jealous and dog me about.'

'Oh, Bernadette!'

'Well—what? Bernadette does not yearn for a husband who would watch her all the time. Marry a Cazau or Mestræs girl. I shall not be at a loss to pick up some honest fellow who will not be always suspecting me.'

'He will not love you as I do,' replied Pierre, with tears in his eyes.

This was so heartily spoken that his hearer softened a little.

'Where did you get the money to come to Paris?' she suddenly inquired.

'My father gave me it.'

'That is not true; your father has not a penny piece.'

'You are mistaken; he had twelve hundred francs, which he was saving up for the day when I married you.'

'Twelve hundred francs!—he stole them!'

'You know it's no such a thing. Why do you try to inflict pain on me? I have never done you any harm, and now you make me hear that the

old man is a thief. I would rather you would call me all the names you can lay your tongue to.'

'Come, come,' responded Bernadette, 'do not wax wrathy, my little Pierre. I spoke too quick—it slipped me in spite of myself—the old fellow was always a bit of a miser. He might easily have a nest-egg without anybody knowing it. Still that does not make out that you would not have acted wiser by not coming here to squander money which would have helped set us up in housekeeping. But since you are here—so much the worse! Stay here until I return to our parts with you; which will come to pass quicker than you believe.'

'Ah! if you liked, it might be at once.'

'There's no way of doing that. My young lady needs me; and if I left her——! My young lady is ill.'

'Since when?'

'Since we got here. And nobody knows what's the ail. The doctor cannot tell.'

'Of sorrow, perhaps, at having left him in the country——'

'M. Aurélien? No; he is here. He has come twice to our house; it is true that she was hardly able to get a word with him—her sister was always by when he called: she is jealous——'

'Of her sister?'

'And of him, of course! She wants him for herself. Pooh! she may be a lady of title, but she is not worth much.'

'You told me so already at Arcachon. What is her father like?'

'The marquis? oh, he loves his daughters too

well; only he is rather afraid of the dark one. When she wants anything, she has only to storm and stamp and roll her big black eyes about, and he gives in like a little dog to whom a whip and a cake are shown—he knows what to do. Poor old gentleman! she is fretting him to death; he is really getting thinner every day, and if this continues she'll wear mourning for her father before she does her wedding-dress—and it's what she wants.'

'Well, she is a wretch!'

'Indeed, she is; and, if I were listened to, the marquis would send her to Spain, where he met her mother—to his misfortune. But I can do nothing; and I am not going to set up to give him advice. If he lets his bad daughter eat him up, it's his own look-out. But I do not mean to let anybody touch my mistress, and that is why I stay.'

'What! is this sister capable of doing bodily harm to her own?'

'She is only a half-sister, and she has tried it. I will tell you about it when we are married, my dear Pierre. Luckily I was on the spot; but she will be at it again in another way; but, if I am at hand, I shall not go at her by the longest road round.'

'What will you do?'

'For the present there is no need of your knowing. All I can tell you is that I have her account ready, and I shall stick it under her nose when the settlement should be made. Now, let's speak of ourselves. I have made peace with you. There is no use of our disputing; we had better be friends, and see one another. Where are you living?'

'Over there, on the Boulevard de Courcelles, at the Providence Hotel.'

'Good—I can see it from here; a pretty dust-hole! You were better housed in your hut at home.'

'Oh, I am not hard to suit, and I settled down there because I knew your master lived somewhere near the Monceau Park. You told me as much at Arcachon, but no more.'

'Because I did not know much down there. That's the marquis's town house before you—the handsome two-storey one, with a pointed roof.'

'And a garden coming forward?'

'Exactly; that garden communicates with the park by a gate in the palings. Mdlle. Nicole's rooms are on the top floor. If she were to come to the window you would see her from here, but she has no desire to-day, poor soul! She is not able even to rise from her easy-chair. This cannot last long, and I—— But I must go on with what I was saying. Our house-door is in the other street, called the Rue de Vigny. Will you remember that name?'

'I should think I would!'

'It's number nine. There you can write to me, but I would rather not. Tia Carmen might tamper with the letter—you know, the old Spanish hag who is always hanging to her mistress's skirts—her familiar devil, and she abominates me. I will write to you, which will be safer, whenever there is any news.'

'Am I not to see you?'

'Yes; every day—but not at our place or your hotel. I will come into the park, here, every day

at noon. You can wait for me on this seat. Now, my Pierre, good-bye until to-morrow. You are not angry with me for having welcomed you roughly?'

'Are you with me, for having come to Paris without your leave?'

'No, my man! In token of which——'

Without heeding the promenaders, who were not in great numbers anyway, Bernadette offered her ruddy lips to the resin-gatherer, and a hearty kiss sealed the reconciliation in the broad daylight.

The servant perceived too late that a gentleman had seen them, one who came out of a side-walk. He was known only too well to her.

She lowered her little veil precipitately, and fled without adding a word to the kiss.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SHADOW FALLS.

THIS untimely witness was the Viscount Saint-Osvin, and she hoped that he had not had time to scan her features.

She was mistaken. He had good eyes, and he had clearly recognised the Cadichonne, whom he had, many times since his return to town, seen in the Briouze Mansion, dressed like a Parisian.

He had not wasted any love on her since the trick she played him at Mensignac, and he was delighted to catch her in the very act of emphasized flirtation.

He promised himself to acquaint the marquis with the fact, in order to induce him to drive away this shameless hussy who let a man kiss her in a public garden.

She hampered him almost as much as she did Mdlle. de Briouze, and yet they had not wrested from the marquis her expulsion.

But the Handsome Fernand did not at all know the fine fellow who had been gratified with this caress *al fresco*, and, to fortify the denunciation he contemplated, he wished to know on whom Bernadette had bestowed this rather too tender a politeness.

Whilst the lady's-maid was speeding hence like a bird, Pierre, bewildered by the kiss and the abrupt flitting, stood there, watching his intended, without paying attention to the gentleman who stopped a few steps off, and scrutinized him with persistent attention.

The viscount had never been to Arcachon, but during his stay at Mensignac he had more than once heard Mdlle. de Briouze talk of the levity of Nicole's attendant nymph, and her acquaintance with a fawn of the piny woods.

The viscount was a good enough physiognomist to see a Landes peasant under the ready-made clothes worn rather awkwardly by Pierre la Chamade, but he wanted to be sure that this lounge in the Parc Monceau came from Arcachon.

It was a good opportunity to do mischief to Bernadette in more than one way, and he took care not to miss it.

So he continued to quiz him so long and closely, that Pierre said testily to him :

'Why are you staring at me like that?'

'Because I could lay a bet that we are from the same parts,' impudently replied Fernand. 'I come from Bordeaux, and you belong to the suburbs. I can tell that by your face and accent.'

'Very likely. What next?'

'My compliments! You were just now talking with the prettiest lass of Arcachon.'

'Do you know her?'

'Rather! Who does not know Bernadette? I have just come from passing a week in a country-house in Périgord, where she was in service, and I did not find time pass slowly, I warrant you. I cannot make out why she pretended not to know me, we were so thick together there. But women are all the same—one day they run after you, and next day they turn their backs on you, as though they had never set eyes on you.'

Pierre turned pale visibly, but it was with anger, and the Handsome Fernand comprehended that it would not be wise to continue in that tone. He would not have been afraid of a duel with a member of his circle, but the resin-gatherers do not understand jests, and this particular one appeared quite able and apt to stop his mouth with a blow of the fist.

The only reason why Pierre did not employ this manual argument is that he wanted to lead 'the swell' to empty his budget. Jealousy had bitten him, and he wondered how far the kindness of his intended had gone.

'Bernadette is a virtuous girl,' he said in a hollow voice.

'Virtuous but pleasant,' sneered the viscount.

'She is full of good points. I was able to appreciate that——'

'I, too, know it—for I am going to marry her.'

'Really! Why did you not say so before? That alters the case. I may have caused you some pain, because you badly interpreted my remarks. Now, I very much regret having spoken lightly of the charming girl, and I hasten to proclaim that Mdlle. Bernadette is as virtuous as she is pretty. I beg you to tell her all the good I think of her—I am the Viscount de Saint-Osvin, a friend of the Marquis de Briouze; and I offer my most sincere prayers for the happiness of that bewitching person and your own. Good-bye, monsieur!' concluded the traitor, spinning round on his high heels, like an old-time courtier.

Pierre had some merit in resisting the impulse which seized him to fall upon this insolent coxcomb with doubled fists; but he had not lost his wits so far as to risk being clapped into the police-station for the pleasure of ventilating his passion, and there he remained, chewing the bitter cud, whilst the Handsome Fernand went without hurrying towards the Van-Dyck Avenue.

Once more in this world a bold-faced knave had the advantage over an honest man who lacked presence of mind.

Pierre was wounded to the heart, and the viscount went his way enchanted at this meeting, out of which he hoped to draw a gain.

'That girl played me a trick at Mensignac,' he muttered between his set teeth; 'she shall pay me for it. Her resin-gatherer will have no more of her, and we shall see how Briouze will take the

tale which I am going to serve up to him smoking hot. Dolores will be glad to get rid of the minx. We lost the first rubber from having played it too quickly; the next one we will play better, and I begin to believe that luck will return to us.'

Since the events marking his sojourn at Mensignac, Saint-Osvin had wholly entered into the views of his accomplice, after having hesitated a little.

He had at length perceived that he had no chance of winning Dolores, who had never meant to lose her proud independence, and the foiling of his nocturnal outrage had not encouraged him to drive his trenches towards Mdlle. Nicole.

And now he knew why he stood in the vexatious position of a discarded swain, and one rejected by a second lady also. Both the sisters loved this gentleman fallen from the clouds, this Aurélien Biscaros, whom spiteful hazard had set in relations with him.

He was the stumbling-block to be suppressed.

The viscount had already tried to do that, but he had missed in his shot. It is more difficult to get rid of an enemy in Paris than on the edge of the woods during a boar hunt.

Violence was no longer in fashion. Aurélien would have to be removed in some other manner, and Fascinating Fernand puzzled how to do it.

He had a fertile imagination in this line, and he ruminated over several different plans already, which he withheld from Mdlle. de Briouze.

She herself had one, not at all resembling that explained to Saint-Osvin in Périgord, and this she kept to herself.

Biscaros was in Paris at the Helder Hotel with his friend Caussade. He had not omitted calling at Briouze House, where he had been well received by its proprietor; but he had not often repeated his call—two visits in a fortnight.

Perhaps he had noticed that M. de Briouze had less cordially welcomed him, or he may have despaired of finding a chance to pay court to Nicole, who had been very badly ailing since her return to town.

The viscount rejoiced at the scanty eagerness shown by his rival; but this did not encourage him, for he suspected that he kept up communication with Mdlle. Nicole by the intermediation of the Cadichonne; and, on the other hand, he believed Mdlle. de Briouze most capable of luring elsewhere the dashing youth who would not so much as look at her.

On this day he had been on the look-out for clearing up the doubts tormenting him, and the meeting he had in the Parc Monceau added a trump-card the more to his cards.

He was expected at the Briouzes'. About midday he came daily to chat with his old friend, who, after the coolness at Mensignac, had become fond of him again, and could not do without his visits.

His daughter, Dolores, too, took care not to let her friendship with Saint-Osvin cool, because he might still be useful to her to bring her fresh projects to a good result.

As usual, the viscount was received in a large room, which served as smoking-room and library, where the owner liked to pass an hour or two after breakfast.

Contrary to her habit, Mdlle. de Briouze had come there, and was offering her father a cup of tea, when the Handsome Fernand presented himself with his customary free-and-easy bearing.

'How pat you fall, my dear fellow!' said the marquis bluntly. 'You can help me argue with my daughter, who wishes me to discharge her sister's maid. I do not care to keep the creature at all, but, then, Nicole is so much attached to her.'

'All the more reason to drive her away,' interrupted the dark-eyed lady. 'You should have done it on the morrow of that night which you seem to have forgotten. But you are of unqualifiable weakness, papa, and Bernadette has gained an influence over my sister, which is revolting to me. I cannot say that Nicole's bearing to me has been other than unsisterly—she has never of late shown me affection or the respect due to me as her elder; but I am always interested in her, because we have the same father, and I see she is going to her ruin.'

'Pooh! You exaggerate, my dear girl. Nicole has taken a liking to this Bernadette, because Bernadette is most devoted to her; but Nicole is too well-bred to listen to the teachings of a menial.'

'If they were only teachings, they might pass; but when they come to be examples! Your friend, M. de Saint-Osvin, will tell you—I mean, reiterate to you that this personification of effrontery invited him to her mistress's rooms—he was very wrong to go there, but I do not call him the greatest culprit.'

'I do not think any more of that silly story,

said the marquis; 'and Nicole never knew anything about it, thank heaven! However, Bernadette stuck to it that she had not decoyed you to Nicole's rooms, and that you had hardly more than entered when our faithful Carmen ran and roused me. It was much ado about nothing, to sum it all up; and if I had sent Bernadette away next day, I should have been very much perplexed how to answer Nicole.'

'I do not see what accounts you have to make to her, papa,' replied Dolores ironically. 'But it appears as if her will overrules your own. The world is upside down here.'

'Not at all,' returned the old nobleman testily. 'Nicole has never fallen short in the respect due to me; and if I should require her to part with this maid, I am sure Nicole would obey me. But she is ill, very ill indeed; and I would not select this time to vex her. Besides, granting that Bernadette was frivolous at Mensignac, and even at Arcachon, she is leading a quiet, steady life in Paris, and she does not leave her mistress; she never goes out. A country-girl who never saw Paris before! It is rather meritorious.'

'Ahem!' coughed the viscount. 'I just met her in the Parc Monceau.'

'Upon some errand which Nicole gave her to do.

'May be so; but she lingered on the way, for I caught her in a side-path, chatting very affectionately with a young fellow.'

'Are you sure of this?'

'Sure? She ran away when she saw me, but her young man, when I questioned him, did not deny—for that matter it would have been hard—

when I came up they were kissing without any shame and heed of the bystanders.'

'There! Did I not tell you that this girl was a hussy of the worst sort?' exclaimed Mdlle. de Briouze.

'It is rather too much!' muttered M. de Briouze. 'To kiss a man in the streets!'

'He was not the first-comer for her, though,' said the viscount, smiling. 'I spoke with the young man, and he told me that he was her sweetheart down at Arcachon. He is not a bad-looking lad, by my faith! And she must be fond of him, for she wrote to him to come to town and meet her. She cannot live without seeing him.'

'Now, papa, do you hesitate about sending the baggage away?' inquired Dolores.

'Certainly not. This goes beyond the bounds. I will notify her of her discharge not later than this evening. Nicole may feel a good deal of sorrow, but I will make her listen to reason. I only regret being obliged to act so abruptly. I would rather have waited until she was better.'

'What is the matter?' asked Fernand the Handsome.

'I do not know, and the medical attendants are as much in the dark. She always had excellent health, and the season she spent at Arcachon had farther strengthened her. When we got back to town she was wonderfully well. But two days after she complained of headaches and other pains, and she was unable to sleep. She has grown thin; and when you see her you will be frightened at the change taken place in her. Yesterday I called into consultation two of the

"princes of science," as they are styled nowadays. They pronounced the case one of general wasting away from weakness. The fact is that they see the effect, and not the cause. One of them told me that the symptoms of this strange malady were the same as in cases of certain poisonings. But he no more believes than I in my poor Nicole being poisoned. They prescribed rest and fortifying draughts, but the patient gets no better. I am very distressed.'

'I am not, papa,' intervened Dolores curtly. 'Your doctors are blockheads. I know what ails my dear sister, though I am not so much older—grant me wiser, when I tell you that it rests with you alone to cure her.'

'How so?'

'Marriage, papa; that's the remedy. I am astonished that you should not have seen that she is love-sick.'

'It is possible, after all is considered,' agreed M. de Briouze.

'Some secret sentiment—as often comes to young girls—a forbidden attachment——'

'No, no; she would have told me—she has no secrets from her father.'

'I am not going to try to remove that illusion, papa. But I do say that I resign my right of precedence in order to have her saved; and her marriage may come off before mine, whatever society says.'

'Marry her—marry her! That is easy to say.'

'And to do, papa. Suitors for the hand of a De Briouze are as numerous as the stars. Your trouble will be the multiplicity of choice; but I believe the best way will be to let her choose.'

The viscount could not recover from surprise at hearing this language from Dolores' lips, when she had, at Mensignac, not at all concealed that she was endeavouring to throw a spell over Aurélien Biscaros. She could not be unaware that Nicole loved him, and yet she advised her father to let her follow her inclination!

Whence came this change of tactics, and what designs did it hide? She could not still think of consigning her sister to the viscount. After the evil night's work at Mensignac, M. de Briouze had explained his mind in such a way as to remove from Saint-Osvin all hope of ever becoming his son-in-law.

He therefore considered himself out of the race; but he was only the more interested in knowing the dark-eyed plotter's true intentions.

Whilst reflecting, he watched the old nobleman, and for the first time remarked an alteration in the features of one usually resigned to things as they came.

After having been in youth a dashing cavalier, M. de Briouze had become, after his two ventures in matrimony, and the two deaths which impressed him profoundly, a grave and correct nobleman, without giving up his pastimes—hunting, riding, and card-play; and he had long maintained himself at the culminating point of life, called the ripe age, in full possession of his moral and physical powers.

He had gained a tranquil happiness, only troubled by more anxiety than he showed about settling his daughters' future; and to preserve this happiness he had let the headstrong Dolores take an over-

bearing course, of which he was to reap the penalty.

Such men do not bend gradually, but break all at once.

So with Henri de Briouze.

The arrow which, poisoned or not, had struck his favourite daughter so cruelly, seemed to have glanced into his bosom too, for in three weeks he had grown ten years older. His cheeks fell in, the gaze was dulled, his lip hung down, his hands shook, and his hair came out as the leaves drop in November.

He was no more than the ghost of his former self. His intelligence became enfeebled at the same time as his body.

Of the brilliant noble of other days remained merely a breathless old dotard, rapidly gliding down into the final decrepitude.

Fernand the Handsome had not taken notice of it, as he had other cares than for his patron's health ; and, moreover, since his stay at Mensignac, he only saw him at calls, although formerly he stayed with him for hours to cheat him at play.

On this day, during this three-cornered talk over Bernadette's conduct and Mdlle. Nicole's marriage, Saint-Osvin examined him with more than ordinary attention, and was struck by the change.

He guessed without difficulty that he was not alone in helping to destroy the old noble's health by dissipation, and that the treacherous daughter had an object in view, which she was achieving with other instruments.

'Her father is too fond of her sister and not enough of her, so that over this illness, which

makes the younger more interesting, my dark-eyed charmer is losing her sway,' he reasoned. 'She fears that he will disinherit her if her behaviour is exposed ; for even I might show her iniquity if she undermines my credit here. She knows that he would not approve her marrying this Bordeaux upstart, of whom her sister is enamoured. She wants to kill her father by some means which will not set the hounds of justice upon her. The Code does not prohibit a daughter holding back censure and appeals from a man who will lead a fast and killing life. Every night the croupier's rake or the wine-glass drives a nail the more in Briouze's coffin, and, as the English say of those who drink themselves to death upon gin, they go by a road carpeted with "white satin," if it be steep down-hill. If he has fallen into the clutches of the crew from whom I alone could keep him, he will not last three months. The poor old boy's account is settled. Well played, Dolores!' mentally concluded Saint-Osvin. 'Only I do not see that I gain anything by this deep devilry, and if you do not want me to put the drag on your scheme, you will have to give me a slice of the cake.'

As Handsome Fernand never lost sight of his own interest, he set incontinently to seeking what gain he might draw from his friend's death.

He clearly saw that he would lose the protection of this high-placed nobleman, who covered the outcast and blemished one.

What was the compensation, if any?

He could not think of marrying Mdlle. Nicole any sooner after than before her father's decease. She execrated him, and loved Biscaros ; therefore

nothing could be hoped on that side by Saint-Osvin, who saw clearly.

On the other hand, it did not seem impossible for him to wed his old love.

He knew that she had a fancy for this same Biscaros, who seemed created to raise troubles for him; but he also knew that Biscaros did not like her, and would not be won over.

Repulsed by him, would not Dolores become discouraged, and, to revenge herself for that scorn, marry?

Whom? Her rumoured lover, of course, for no one in society would contest the place with him. He was not going to be particular; and, after all, he had a title—authentic, if bespattered.

Dolores would be a splendid match, according to all accounts. She had private property from her mother, a marriage portion, and he might well believe that her father would not forget her in his will. She would be the woman to prompt the entry of her name if he were the father to omit it.

There might be some risks to run by the husband of a woman who indirectly was killing her father, and—who knows?—directly doing her half-sister to death perhaps. He flattered himself, however, that he would be able to master her when hatred should succeed the passion she felt for the Gascon.

The viscount was not squeamish as to murder, since he had not hesitated to fire on his rival at the hunt. Indeed, he had no more scruples than the lady.

One point alone remained obscure—Why did Dolores advise her father to let Nicole marry as she wished? She knew that Nicole, left free in her choice, would select Aurélien.

The viscount concluded that the girl was doomed by the doctors, and that her sister, warned by them, relied on death clearing her from the path.

Settled now on the situation, he determined to let things go on and to wait.

'Let her finish with her enfeebled father,' he thought; 'she is playing my own game without suspecting so. I shall take good care not to contravene her operations. I shall stand aside, and she will be grateful for that. The final rubber will begin at Briouze's death, and, meanwhile, I have plenty to occupy my leisure. This lady's-maid and this Gascon are obstacles in my way. The girl knows why I went to Nicole's rooms; and the fellow has a pair of dice in his pocket which may be used to my injury. This does not include his knowledge of my having tried to send a bullet into his skull. I must remove this couple from my way.'

This meditation had been long, and the marquis had not interrupted it; for Dolores was still waiting till her father answered her.

'Be it so,' he finally said. 'I will have a talk with Nicole, and send away her maid this day. But let me be in peace; this conversation has wearied me.'

That was only too plainly seen, and the viscount took leave.

He had not lost his morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHADOW DEEPENS.

On arriving in Paris, Biscaros and his friend had put up at the Helder Hotel, as we have stated; but, although lodged under the same roof, they only saw one another at meals, which they took together at the Lyon d'Or restaurant, its gastronomical appendage.

Caussade had taken the trip solely to spend for amusement the savings of a summer passed entirely in the country, and he conscientiously applied himself to this end. He was to be seen daily in the Bois de Boulogne or the Champs Elysées, and in the play-houses at night, to say nothing of the card-rooms and late supper-houses.

He had not been able to attract Aurélien into his orbit; on the contrary, to this jolly Périgordian he led a rather melancholic existence in the Gay City.

His heart was taken, and he thought of Nicole alone. He fled the pleasures in which Caussade revelled, and he was more often met in the Parc Monceau than on the main boulevards.

He wandered around the marquis's residence instead of entering, because he had not been as well received on his first call as he desired.

M. de Briouze, who had so warmly greeted him at Mensignac, showed himself somewhat cold, perhaps because he was not well. Nicole had made but a short stay in the drawing-room; and her sister had flashed incendiary glances at Biscaros

without expressing a hope that they should see him again.

Whence came these changes of bearing? Biscaros could not very well puzzle this out, although he suspected the Viscount de Saint-Osvin of having a hand in it. He was astonished that the faithful Bernadette gave no token yet of life.

He did not impart his sorrows to Caussade, who had no time to listen to him ; but he did not think of giving up the game, and he prolonged his stay in Paris to await a return into favour by the occasion which did not hasten to come.

He was in black thoughts, whilst his friend basked in gas-light.

And yet he had one happy distraction within the last two days.

The genial deputy-judge, Camille Civrac, who had not a little contributed to extract him from a dread pitfall, also came to put up at the Helder Hotel.

Biscaros had greeted him with open arms, and had not tarried in opening his heart to him also, confessing that he loved Mdlle. Nicole de Briouze without hope.

He had even informed him what part Saint-Osvin was playing in the marquis's house.

The intimacy of the viscount with the marquis's heiress was of public notoriety, so that there was no betrayal of a family secret in telling it to the young judge, who already knew something about how matters stood. Through delicacy, the Gascon, of course, said nothing of the dark-eyed beauty's attempts to enthral him. But on what concerned the Handsome Fernand, Biscaros had not been

so reserved; for he imparted to Civrac his doubts on the nobleman's honour, and Civrac had spontaneously offered to help him clear them up.

Though a deputy-judge in the provinces, a magistrate can obtain from the Bench and the Police of Paris information which would be refused a private citizen.

Without reckoning his early fellowship with Aurélien, Camille had taken him into warm friendship since the Arcachon event.

The human heart is so constituted that a man is more attached to those whom he saves than to those saving him.

Hence, on the morrow of his arrival, Civrac went out to do this service to Biscaros, and to pay a visit to Briouze House.

At the Châlet of Arcachon the marquis's elder daughter had pleasantly invited him there, and he took care not to waste the invitation, as the dark-eyed one much pleased him, and he would have eagerly supplanted the viscount.

This day, which he planned so well to employ, was the very same as that when Pierre met Bernadette in the Parc Monceau. Biscaros, who did not go there so often as before, passed it all away, shut up in his suite at the hotel.

Caussade, who roamed about more and more, had not come in overnight. He arrived at noon merely to dress and announce to Biscaros that he was going to dine out at Saint-Germain in merry company. He had tried to allure him away, but the lover had resisted stoutly, and the tempter had gone away by himself to Cytherea—that is, the Pavillon Henri IV.

At seven o'clock, our hero sat all alone at his kept table in the Lyon d'Or, where he had ordered dinner for two. He liked good living, and his absorbing passion had not impaired his appetite.

Civrac did not keep him long waiting. By his aspect, the host could see that he brought some news, whether good or bad—more likely good, to judge by his satisfied air.

The teasing deputy-judge gave himself the pleasure of letting his friend long for it on the grill of desire.

Under pretence of his dying with hunger, he began by swallowing a dozen oysters, and when he yielded to opening his mouth for another purpose than eating, he uttered this blunt phrase :

'My boy, our poor Marquis de Briouze has not a month to live.'

'Have you seen him?' inquired the Gascon quickly.

'Yes; he was shown to me, to prove he is still in life; but he is almost the same as dead, for I had all the trouble in the world to get a few sensible words out of him. The dashing nobleman strikes me as being a drivelling dotard.'

'Were not his daughters by?'

'One is ill—the young one.'

'Nicole!'

'But the other does not leave him for a moment. She takes the most tender care of him; I fear she will kill him with kindness. It appears that the old gallant has been leading a devil of a life lately —Caussade is a slow-coach to him, and his constitution would not stand it. I am still wondering

how she came to receive me, for she did not look for my visit at all, it appears, and the old gentleman hardly more than remembered me. She is not ailing; on the contrary, she is in marvellous good health, and I think she has improved in beauty since her return to Paris. She asked particularly after you.'

'But her sister, whom you say is ill?' cried Biscaros, with discourteous impatience.

'She is ill. The house is a hospital, though in a most healthy district. It looks as though their season in our land of Arcachon did them no good.'

'It has done nobody good,' moaned the Gascon.

'I do not know about that, my dear boy,' quickly said Civrac. 'Certainly you met with a disagreeable adventure there; but you came out of it with honour, and—all's well that ends well. Wait for the upshot of the events; and from the present remember that, if you had not been unjustly accused, Mdlle. Nicole would probably have never been interested in you; whilst now——'

'Go on!'

'I will wager that she loves you.'

'You would lose, I fear.'

'No. I am convinced that she is pining because they want to wed her to another.'

'To whom?'

'I am ignorant; but they will not marry her against her will, and you will have great chances if she loses her father, as I foresee. When an orphan, she can wed whom she likes, and that's you, my dear old friend!'

'If I only could believe this!'

'You will see; in any event, the first use she will make of her liberty will be to part from her sister. Then you will have the coast clear, for nothing will remove the impression from my mind that this half-Spaniard is trying to select a husband for her sister and impose him upon her. Now, why is she hostile to your candidature? I cannot guess—unless she has a fancy for—for you.'

Biscaros feebly tried to protest against the supposition, but the sagacious vice-judge, without heeding the demur, pursued his pleading:

'Then all would be explained. In her sister Mdlle. de Briouze sees a rival, and she urges their father to sacrifice her. It has delighted her to see the poor old man broken on the wheel of pleasure, and she does not reflect that she is going from her mark, for he will die before his daughter is married. This beautiful Dolores is a brazen-faced fiend. I know she is since I have gathered information, and I believe her fit for anything—except a good action. She has flirted right and left, and Gémozac was one of the captives of this Circe. I ask myself if she did not contrive to have him shot.'

'By whom?'

'Some tramp whom she paid for the job, or some peasant who may have fallen in love with her, and whom she promised anything if he killed Gémozac.'

'That is an idea which would not have come to me,' muttered Biscaros.

'Because you are not in the law. It is my business to follow up effects to the causes. Whether I have hit the gold or not, it is plain that Mdlle. de

Briouze was interested in the removal of the luckless fellow who bragged too loudly. If the search had been made on that line, perhaps the assassin would have been discovered. At the end of my vacation, I shall pass through Bordeaux before I go to plunge into the obscurity of Marennes, and I shall lay my idea before the investigating magistrate.'

'The one who let me out on bail?' said the Gascon, with bitterness. 'If you rely on his clearness of sight——'

'I rely mainly on his impartiality. M. Sourdeval is honest, and when I shall have communicated to him what I have gleaned about the marquis's dark daughter, I hope to decide him into signing in your favour a decree of "not proven." I am still classifying my pieces of information, but I shall teach him all about this demon and her associate——'

'The viscount?'

'Yes; that viscount. He is one by right of birth—more's the pity for French nobility, for he is worse than the marquis's vile daughter. I know so much about him that, if he had been at Arcachon on the day when Gémozac was murdered, I should not have hesitated to believe he was the assassin. But he does not seem to have left Paris this summer, or till the end of September, to go into Périgord to the Château de Mensignac.'

'I was there, and I learnt to know him also. Then you have managed to obtain particulars of his past, and the life he leads?'

'I went first to the Bench, on which I have a friend; I learnt nothing there. M. de Saint-Osvin

has no court record, because he has never been condemned or prosecuted—even in the police-court. He has had the talent never to fall under the application of the law ; what we call keeping on the margin of the code. It follows that he might be given the highest appointments without his previous record being opposed to him, for, legally speaking, it is as white as snow.'

'Do you mean that we have no weapons against the man ?'

'I beg your pardon ! What escapes justice, the police collects. The viscount has no court record but he is down in the police black-books.'

'Have you seen that ?'

'My friend of the Bench sent me to one of the chiefs of the Quai des Orfèvres Préfecture, and he was kind enough to communicate passages which might interest me as a magistrate, so that I have now a very clear idea of the character, and I am in a condition to make his biography.'

'You know whether it interests me or not ?'

'Then, my dear friend, Fernand de Saint-Osvin is the son of a very genuine nobleman in Normandy, bearing the title of viscount before the Revolution, but poor as Job. His father had to pinch to get him into Saint Cyr Military College, whence he came out as a sub-lieutenant in a marching regiment. After two years' service—very ill-done —he was forced to send in his resignation, because he was overburdened with debts. Then he went to Russia to seek his fortune. He did not find it there, but he made the conquest of an old countess, who loaded him with favours and presents. She died, and did not forget him in her will. The

rumour there was that he had hastened her end—but that may be understood in different ways. He came back to France much richer than when he departed, but in less consideration. He paid his debts, and, thanks to his title, introduced himself into a class of society where they do not look too narrowly at a high-born gentleman slightly besmirched, who has money. He never won the esteem of men, but he was the favourite of the gentler sex. They have always been on his side, and even they whom he robbed, probably, have upheld him. He is blessed with showy qualities, and, moreover, is a charmer. He may be scorned by his dupes, but they endure without complaining. He does with them whatever he pleases.'

'Like all his kind,' sadly commented Biscaros. 'Women only adore those who maltreat them.'

'Not all, most happily, but Mdlle. de Briouze is one of those who like being bullied. She is madly enamoured of the Handsome Fernand, and whatever he does she has defended him against everybody. She coaxed her father into patronizing him everywhere, so that he was received in leading clubs where he would otherwise have been bombarded with black-balls but for M. de Briouze's seconding him. The most curious thing is that he managed to get tolerated, although he was more than once suspected of card-sharping. Last year, notably, he was almost entangled in a case of 'prepared' cards, brought into one of the first-class clubs of Paris by a waiter. It was whispered that he was in partnership with this servant, and profited by the fraud. He was not openly accused, perhaps because it is known he

is a first-rate hand at all kinds of weapons. He got out of the scrape by ceasing to play at *quinze.*'

'Now he plays at crabs,' muttered Biscaros.

'How do you know that?'

'I saw him at work in the Philologie Club at Périgueux, and I am almost certain that he played with unfair dice. I had a rather lively altercation with him on the subject.'

'Did nothing come of it?'

'He told me before twenty persons that he would demand satisfaction. He did not, and the affair fell through. I suppose he related the event to Mdlle. de Briouze, and she ordered him not to go on with it, as she did not wish him to risk his precious life.'

'I rather believe she was interested in yours. But did not your quarrel make a stir at Périgueux?'

'Very little. The players who saw it did not pay any great attention, and I only mentioned it to Caussade. I was content with confiscating the dubious dice.'

'Have you got them?'

'Yes. I have kept them.'

'That is good to know, and I shall perhaps ask you for them to have them examined.'

'What's the good? If false, he will say I substituted them for those he was playing with. Besides, it is an old story now. I might also accuse him of having shot at me at the hunt. He would deny, and I have no proof.'

'What! did he fire on you?'

'Yes, at Mensignac, during a *battue;* the bullet intended for me just grazed my head.'

'Whew! it strikes me the viscount's record is growing. One of these days you will see that he will turn out to have killed Gémozac.'

'He could not have done that when he was not at Arcachon,' remonstrated Biscaros.

'Who knows he was not?' replied Civrac. 'The Bordeaux express travels very fast—seventeen leagues an hour, stoppages included. Since railways are improved, alibis require cautious handling. Suppose that this Saint-Osvin took the 9 a.m. fast train. He would have reached Arcachon at nightfall, and, without anybody remarking him, he could easily have gone out into the forest around the Periwinkles Villa. The bullet which hit Gémozac came from small arms, and a pistol is portable in the pocket.'

'Right; but he could not have divined that Gémozac would come to be killed at any given hour. It must be surmised, therefore, that Saint-Osvin received instructions.'

'From Mdlle. de Briouze, of course! I told you just now that she may have bribed some woodman to remove the plague. Possibly I am wrong, but I persist in believing that she played the leading part in this tragedy. She has been the head conceiving the plan of crime; another the arm which executed it—and this other may well be the viscount. This will be determined by the inquiry surely to be opened by the judge when I shall have given him the fresh points.'

'He had better open it soon, then, for in the meantime these wretches are conspiring against Mdlle. Nicole, and heaven only knows what they will do with her, unless justice puts it out of their

power to harm her! They have already tried to blast her reputation.'

'By what process?'

'It would take too much time to relate the whole, but I can state that, at Mensignac, that poor young lady's sister and her colleague formed a plot against her, only thwarted by her honest servant-maid.'

'By Bernadette, her maid?'

'Yes, Bernadette, who would lay down her life for her young mistress. You ought to question her before you confer with your friend M. Sourdeval. She will completely enlighten you.'

'Good; but how am I to see her?'

'I am unaware. Since I have been in town, I myself have not been able to reach her. But I have confidence, and I am almost sure that she will call me to her aid if Mdlle. Nicole runs any immediate danger. She knows where I live.'

'Then she will write you?'

'Or come herself, unless she is closely watched by the other servants of the mansion. They are all paid by the elder sister to second her in her enterprises against Nicole.'

'The deuce! What you tell me is not highly encouraging.'

'Certainly not. But I do not renounce the defence of Mdlle. Nicole, and I am ready to risk myself when it must be done.'

'I hope it will be soon, for her father may be removed at any instant, and when he is gone she will be alone in the wild-cat's den. You must without fail get into communication with her before she is at the mercy of her worst enemies—which is

not difficult. The house in the Rue de Vigny is not guarded like a fortress.'

'Better, my dear Civrac. Hate is vigilant, and that woman will do her utmost to prevent me entering.'

'Perhaps. But I freely wager that Dolores is more likely to come to see you.'

'She may come, but I will not receive her.'

'You would act wrongly. In your stead, I should feign to meet her sentiments. She would unmask her schemes, and you would know what are her machinations towards her father and her sister. Forewarned is forearmed, and you would be in a better state to defend Mdlle. Nicole.'

As Biscaros shook his head, the speaker proceeded:

'Don't tell me it would be repugnant to you to play this comedy. The end justifies the means, my dear Aurélien, and all means are good when a ferocious beast must be muzzled. But enough of projects like this! We can fall back on them at the right time, and, meanwhile, let us speak of lighter matters. Business to-morrow! Let me tell you that the cooking is very good here.'

'Yes; not bad.'

'And the wines merit praise. This Pontet-Canet would be highly valued in the City of Wine. You and I understand such things, as natives of Bordeaux, and I am sure you are of my opinion.'

'Quite,' absently muttered the Gascon, who, in his present brooding, would have confounded a prime Château-Laffitte with table-wine.

'What does your friend Caussade think? he is an epicure.'

'I—I hardly know. I believe he has not come to Paris to test wine——'

'He prefers laughter from the woo'd to *whines* from the wood—ha! ha! Now, there's a man gay in his fiftieth year—for he must be nigh fifty—if not over it. He has gone away to treat parasites, when it would have been wiser to stay and dine with us. He would have seen pretty faces enough—the room is full of them.'

'Yes; but—he would have been an encumbrance. I do not care to talk before him on the subject which most interests me.'

'Why not? Has he taken up the cause of Mdlle. de Briouze?'

'That's not it; but he is too intimate with the marquis. Then, again, he is too fond of gentle measures. It was he who advised me not to fight the viscount.'

'That is little to be vexed with him for. Saint-Osvin is not worth an honourable man risking life against. You can get the better of him otherwise, I am convinced. I drink to the rogue's confusion! and to your marriage with Mdlle. Nicole de Briouze,' concluded Civrac, raising his glass, and emptying it at a draught.

Biscaros merely wetted his lips in his. He had no inclination to drink, and he envied his companion's merry carelessness, and taking life gaily because he was not in love.

'Just think,' went on the budding judge, 'that in three weeks I shall be mewed up in Marennes, celebrated for its oysters—not the most sprightly companions in the world!—I was wrong in eating them just now. I would have plenty of time for it

when embedded there ; but I shall not find any such palace there, with Renaissance tapestries and doors widely open on a yard full of green trees—it gives the semblance of a garden. But what have we there—that gentleman who appears to be making signs to us ?'

The autumn was commencing, but the temperature was still mild enough for some of the doors of the large dining-room not to be closed ; yet nobody risked health by dining in the courtyard, where feasts were held in summer. It was lighted only by two gas-lamps.

Aroused by Civrac, his host perceived a figure at the end of the yard, whose features he could not distinguish. He was gesticulating animatedly, either to him or to the deputy-judge, who were facing one another near the door.

'Do you know him ?' inquired Civrac.

'I cannot very clearly make him out, but I believe I do not know him.'

'Nor I. Still, he is aiming at one of us. I have not the least desire to disturb myself to question him ; but I should like to know what it is all about.'

Civrac called the head-waiter, and charged him with the errand, which was so speedily executed that, in an instant after, he returned to say that the gentleman wished to speak with M. Aurélien Biscaros on a matter of a pressing nature.

'Well, bring him in,' replied the rather puzzled gentleman.

'He says he does not like to come in.'

'Let me have his name, then.'

'His name, monsieur ?' said the head-waiter. 'I asked him it, and he answered me that it was

not worth the trouble of repeating, as you knew him well.'

'What stuff and nonsense!' ejaculated Civrac. 'Let him go to a hotter country, or, if he will not leave, drive him out. Your yard is not a public place, and we do not want to be stared and glared at.'

The waiter was starting off to execute the order, when Biscaros held up his hand, and inquired what kind of a man he was.

'Is he a beggar?'

'Oh no, monsieur. He would not have been allowed within our establishment if a beggar; but he is not a gentleman——'

'It's a wide field between beggar and gentleman,' laughed the deputy-judge. 'What does he look like?'

'A soldier in civilian dress.'

'Or a police detective,' added Civrac.

Whilst the two were questioning their envoy the man had slowly approached, and he was now under one of the courtyard lamps; but his wide-brimmed hat, slouched over his eyes, hid the upper part of his countenance.

'This is odd!' muttered Biscaros. 'The stature and carriage—I could swear to him, and yet——'

'Who is it?' queried Civrac impatiently.

'I must clear this up.'

'What! are you going to put yourself out for this fellow?'

'I am going to bring him in to you, if he be the man I think.'

'This is getting worse and worse.'

'You will not be sorry to know him, for you have already spoken of him without having seen

him. I will introduce you—you can draw him out—but, mind, it is useless to tell him you are a magistrate.'

'Why so?'

'You will understand why when you learn who he is. I may be wrong, but I'll go and see. Do not stir—I shall hurry back.'

Biscaros rose, stepped out into the yard, and Civrac, watching, saw him take the stranger's hand and draw him, in spite of resistance, to the table, where the dinner was all but over. He even forced the man to sit down between the two, and presented him in these terms:

'This, my dear friend, is the son of an honest old seaman, who used to sail in old times on the *Belle Julie*—a ship fitted out by my father—and who became a resin-gatherer in the Forest of Arcachon at the Truc de la Truque.'

'I know.'

'Pierre La Chamade, here present, lives there with his father, but has come to the capital—I will tell you why in a moment.'

Civrac understood. Judge Sourdeval had spoken at length with him about this forester, who had been liberated after too hasty an arrest. And Biscaros had told his friend that young La Chamade was the intended husband of Bernadette.

So he knew the state of things, and, as the Gascon had foreseen, ought not to be sorry to hear how Pierre would reply to questions the young gentleman was going to put to him.

The most embarrassed of the three was the resin-gatherer; not that the stylish company of the Golden Lion daunted him, but because he had

wanted to take the Gascon aside, having urgent and confidential things to tell him.

He exhausted his stock of nods and winks to make him understand that a third party was one too many, as he could not speak out before him.

Biscaros, in order to set him at his ease, hastened to declare that his guest was his best friend, from whom he had nothing to conceal, having already acquainted him with his intentions as regarded Mdlle. Nicole de Briouze.

'Then I can speak,' returned Pierre thereupon, 'to tell you that Bernadette sent me to you.'

'When did you see her?' quickly inquired the Gascon.

'I met her this morning in the Parc Monceau, but then she did not think of calling you. This evening, though, she wrote me at my lodgings on the Boulevard de Courcelles. I bring you her letter. I had a good deal of trouble to find the Rue du Helder, for I do not know the town, and when I reached your hotel they told me you were at dinner. I answered that I would wait for you, and they let me in there, the courtyard—where I saw you, and—excuse me calling you out.'

'You have acted very well. Give me the letter.'

Pierre handed it to Biscaros, who read it rapidly, and exclaimed :

'Mdlle. Nicole is in danger of death!'

'So it seems,' muttered the resin-gatherer; 'it must be news, for Bernadette would have told me sooner. She writes to me that the marquis has sent her away; that she must leave the house, and may need us this night. I cannot make it out.'

'In fact, it is not very clear,' said Camille,

between his set teeth. 'It looks as if they intended to murder the young lady.'

'All I know is, that I shall obey Bernadette,' observed Pierre. 'She writes to me to go and mount guard by the marquis's house until she comes to relieve me. I shall go and stand about for forty-eight hours, if need be. I am not going to take the liberty of offering you any advice, M. Aurélien. You are warned, and must do your best.'

'What can I do? If I went to M. de Briouze's, they would not let me in.'

'I dare say they would not,' replied the deputy-judge; 'and I give you the counsel not to move until Mdlle. Bernadette explains what is going on. If she is dismissed, you will see her to-morrow, and M. La Chamade will be on the watch for you to-night.'

'I shall watch sharp, too!' exclaimed Pierre, 'for I am worried as much as you, gentlemen. By heaven! I did well to come to Paris, though it would have been a puzzler only for the good old boy saving the twelve hundred francs he stumped up for my journey.'

'The old boy? What old boy?' queried Civrac.

'His father, who has a cabin on the Peak of La Truque,' explained Biscaros. 'Then that is true?' he added to Pierre; 'he did hoard up sixty louis? Bernadette would not believe it.'

'It took him a long time. It was not yesterday he began, d'ye see, for the louis he gave me, though they were as bright as if new, were all of old date.'

'Oldish?'

'Yes; there was not one less than sixty years old—sixty pieces with the figure-head of

Louis XVIII. on them—I noticed them in reckoning them over.'

'That is no reason for your father having long possessed them. Louis XVIII. gold coins are still often enough seen in circulation. I know persons who make collections of them and buy at a slight premium, so that if you want to profit on those you have left——'

'Thank you, monsieur; I am not trying to make money. I only think of defending my sweetheart.'

'Never mind! Keep your new louis! I will cash them and offer them to one of my friends who is looking out for just such coin.'

Biscaros wondered where his friend found the mind to busy about such matters at this moment—he, a grave man, too! Very little would have made him rebuke him for this untimely offer.

Pierre did not so much as reply. He rose, saying:

'Excuse me, M. Aurélien. I have not a minute to lose to go to my post in the Rue de Vigny.'

'Shall I see you to-morrow?' inquired Biscaros of Pierre, without trying to retain him.

'Certainly, M. Aurélien,' was the reply; 'and if Bernadette is discharged, I shall bring her with me.'

He went out as he had come, through the restaurant yard.

'What's to be done?' muttered Biscaros, quite bewildered by the imperfect intelligence brought by the resin-gatherer.

'Nothing at all,' replied the deputy-judge. 'Abide events. And, above all do not trust too

much to that fellow. To me he is very suspicious.'

'He! why? He is a very honest lad!'

'But his father? is he also an honest man?'

'I believe so.'

'Then you admit that he may have saved the sum he has made a gift of to his son?'

'I do not doubt it.'

'Perhaps you will, when I tell you what I learnt from the investigating judge's own mouth.'

'What is it?'

'My dear friend, when the marquis was examined at Arcachon as a witness on the day following your arrest, he gave M. Sourdeval a precious clue. He stated that, on the evening of the crime, having lost at écarté all the thousand-franc notes he had about him, he played what he called his reserve, namely, one hundred gold louis, the greater part of which was won by our poor Gémozac, and the rest by other players.'

'I knew that.'

'Yes; but you did not know that M. de Briouze had the "fad" of collecting gold pieces with the head of Louis XVIII., a fancy conformable with his Legitimist opinions,' said Civrac, smiling; 'and he pointed it out to the magistrate with the aim of furnishing him with a hint to help him to find the assassin. Without attaching great importance to it, Sourdeval informed the commissary and his men, and charged them to inquire of the shopkeepers if any had received such pieces in payment. Not one had been seen in Arcachon. You can guess why.'

'I guess that you suspect old La Chamade of

killing Gémozac to rob him. But I saw the assassin—I surprised him searching the body—I saw him running away, and I fired on him—but I did not recognise the old resin-gatherer.'

'Rather say that you only had a glimpse of the man. It was night, and as he was tearing away at the top of his speed, you had no time to study him. The proof of your not seeing him clearly is in your shooting at him within close range and missing him.'

'Never mind! if it had been La Chamade, I should have identified him.'

'Do you mean you see the old fellow regularly?'

'Not regularly, no. But, as soon as I was set at liberty, I went over to see him at La Truque Peak.'

'What had you to tell him?'

'I knew he was acquainted with all the forest folk, and I wanted to ask him what he thought of the case—if he suspected anyone. He told me that the murder must have been perpetrated by some strange vagabond.'

'Naturally; he would not tell you that it was he.'

'No; but if he had been guilty he would have been uneasy, and he never winced. I remember, to boot, that he spoke to me of having savings which he would employ to send his boy to Paris. Grant that that would have been very blundering on his part if he had stolen this gold.'

'Very blundering or very cunning. It was the best means of averting suspicion.'

'It would have been more simple not to speak of the hoard to me or others, and, above all, not

to have made use of it forthwith. What, he steals! and only a couple of days after gives the spoil to his son, without even asking him to keep the secret? He would have to be mad to do that!'

'That is a barrister's plea, as we hear any day in the assize court: "My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, my client has been found in the possession of property alleged to be purloined from the plaintiff. But if he had feloniously appropriated it, he would have got rid of it," etc., etc. Such arguments prove nothing at all, my dear Aurélien. You should admit in your turn that this hoard of certain gold pieces by a poor tatterdemalion, housed at the Truc de la Truque, is inexplicable. He asserts he amassed them one by one. We would have to suppose that, as soon as he had twenty francs in hand, he went specially to Bordeaux to change them at a money-broker's into a louis minted under the Restoration.'

'Yes, it is inadmissible,' muttered Biscaros, 'and yet there may be some very easy explanation which old La Chamade will give when questioned. For my part, I refuse to believe that this man, who has been honest all his life, should suddenly become a thief and blood-spiller.'

'Nevertheless, such things have been seen.'

'Rarely; but if La Chamade were such a man, I should not defend him. You'll have to prove it to me before I believe, and, in any event, his son Pierre is not guilty.'

'At least, he profits by the theft.'

'Without knowing the gold was stolen. At any rate, I do not interest myself in the father, and I think you will be very right in informing the

investigatory official. He will clear up all these obscurities, as no one more heartily wishes than I, since I am still awaiting my discharge, which would be given immediately on the assassin of Gémozac being discovered. But, meanwhile, I shall continue to see my honest Pierre, who aids us to defend Mdlle. Nicole.'

'You will act properly. Do not believe that my office as magistrate obliges me to denounce the old man immediately. To begin with, I am not here in an official capacity, and I learn a fact against this man by pure hazard. Before all, I am your friend, and I should be sorry to put any checks in your way at the very moment when you are playing so momentous a game. I shall not see Sourdeval until I return to Bordeaux, and I am not going to write to tell him what I have just learnt.'

'I thank you, my dear Camille, and I agree with you that there will always be time to denounce poor old La Chamade. As far as I know, he has not quitted the Peak, and I truly hope that he will finish his days peacefully there.'

'I cannot guarantee the peacefulness,' said the deputy-judge, laughing. 'I persist in thinking that he is not as innocent as you believe; but I do not see any harm in his being let dwell in repose until you shall have finished with this terrible dark enemy. I must say that I do not understand what is going on at the Briouzes'. All these people—viscount, resin-gatherer, lady's-maid—seem to me characters in a comedy——'

'Which threatens to turn to tragedy.'

'Pshaw! you exaggerate! I do not see things

so black. There is some dark intrigue, of which I do not clearly see the end—an unnatural woman who would remove her father and sister by means which the law may not punish her for using, but that is all—worse luck for the marquis.'

'It is not he about whom I concern myself.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CURIOUS MAN-TRAP.

AT this juncture the restaurant light-porter appeared, bearing a letter on a salver, which he presented to the astonished Biscaros, for the writing was not known to him.

He opened it briskly, and said to the messenger, after having read it at a glance:

'It is well. Say I am coming.'

He passed it over to Civrac, muttering:

'Read it.'

He had turned pale on reading it. Civrac was less affected, but as much amazed.

'This is news indeed!' he cried out, after perusing it. 'You are asked to proceed immediately to the Briouze mansion without any reason why! Whom is it from?'

'I know nothing about it. You see it is not signed.'

'It surely cannot be from Bernadette, as the hand is fine—regular spider-tracings—and Cadichonnes do not write in this style. Would it be Mdlle. Nicole?'

'No! I have seen her writing only once—on

a dance-card—but I should know it amongst a thousand specimens.'

'From her sister, perhaps?'

'No more likely. She would not stoop so low as to write that she expected me.'

'Are you going?'

'Without hesitation. Nicole may be in danger, and I must obey the call to where she is, whoever sends it. The carriage is at the restaurant-door, and I——'

'You may say what you please, dear boy, but this looks much like kidnapping. In your place I should be on my guard.'

'Against what? Supposing that Mdlle. de Briouze sent this message, I think she would not cherish the intention to do me any harm.'

'Quite the contrary! I should rather believe she does intend you another fate, which you do not appear ready to accept. But yet—you are right!—Mdlle. Nicole may have need of you, and you ought to go where she is, dear boy, though you might run a serious danger.'

'I am going,' said Biscaros. 'Do you mind settling the bill?'

'All right! you can call this *my* treat, this time. Now, I forewarn you that if you are not home by to-morrow morning, I shall go and ask after you up at the Rue de Vigny.'

'You will not have to take that trouble; I shall be back before midnight.'

'I hope so; and yet we must depend upon nothing, though you may upon me, if anything happens.'

'Thank you! May we soon meet again!'

Biscaros shook his friend's hand, and passed out into the yard to reach the hotel carriage entrance.

In the Rue du Helder was waiting one of those closed-in two-horse carriages, intended to hold four or six persons, such as are used to convey merry-makers to out-of-town resorts, or the Zoological Gardens of the Société d'Acclimatation.

The horses looked well; and the driver was clad in black, looking like a *valet de chambre.*

The porter who had brought in the note opened the door to Biscaros, slammed it shut as soon as he was in, and waved his hand to the coachman as a token he was to drive on.

'So I really have to take you away by force?' breathed a voice, which Aurélien instantly recognised.

'You!' he muttered.

'Yes; I, Dolores! I have serious matters to speak about, so I made up my mind to go seek you. Was I wrong?'

'You could have written me,' almost rudely replied the Gascon; 'I would have answered you.'

'There are things which a woman does not write—which she likes to speak,' returned the audacious creature.

'Speak them, then.'

'Can you not divine them?'

'Suppose I do, and do not want to hear them?'

'You shall hear them in spite of yourself. I should have told you them long ago if you had not pretended to shun me. I have hardly seen you twice since you have been to Paris.'

'I was received at your father's house in such a way that any desire to return there was removed.'

'I have come to find you, precisely to explain what happened. I am going to be frank. I entreat you, therefore, to listen to me with attention. It will take long; for, to make you understand, I must go back to the origin of our relations.'

This programme did not displease Biscaros, for he had expected a scene of passion, and he was ready to defend himself. The interview became one of explanations, and he rejoiced the more, as he would no doubt learn many things of which he was ignorant.

He perceived that he would have ample time to listen to them, as the horses were trotting in the Boulevard Haussmann, probably because the coachman had received orders not to hurry them.

'I am listening,' he coldly said.

'Do you remember the day when you saw me for the first time?' inquired Mdlle. de Briouze, to commence.

'I believe it was at a dance in the Arcachon Casino.'

'It was! You danced, not with me, but with my sister, and you had no eyes but for her. I had none but for you; it was love at first sight!'

Aurélien did not reply, but he drew back into a corner, on the other seat though he was, to avoid a dangerous contact. This opening disquieted him.

'I hoped to see you in our house,' continued the temptress; 'indeed, one of our mutual friends, M. de Caussade, undertook it; but you had not even asked to be introduced to any of us. This token of indifference afflicted me more than it wounded me. The wound has not healed, and I have acutely suffered.'

Biscaros shook his head significantly.

'You are free not to believe me. No doubt you imagine that I was then flirting with the seaside prude darlings; or solely engaged with that Gémozac, who annoyed me with his silly assiduity, and did his best to injure me. He has been justly punished, and I am not sorry for him. His death furnished me with the occasion for which I ardently longed—of showing you that I loved you. I was enabled to defend you when circumstantial evidence accused you.'

'I was innocent,' said Biscaros quickly.

'Nobody would have believed that if I had not declared I saw the assassin, and he was dressed like a peasant of the Landes. I lied in order to save you!'

'Lied! What! did you not see him?'

'No. For that matter, I am certain it was no native, no peasant, who killed Gémozac. But I knew that my testimony would save you, and I did not shrink. Oh, I am not telling you to remind you that you owe me gratitude! I would do more for you than bear false witness. If I did you a capital service on that occasion, so did you save my life at the boar-hunt. We are quits.'

Biscaros thought, 'I was very wrong to kill the boar which would have killed her, Nicole's mortal enemy!' and he was going to protest against the striking of the balance as regarded the value of the two lives.

'Do not interrupt me, I beg,' she said imperiously. 'My confession is not complete, and I want you to hear it to the end.'

'Your confession!' repeated the astonished Gascon.

'Yes; I wish you to know thoroughly what I am. I dare say you have not forgotten our meeting in the Forest of Arcachon a few days after the death of that fellow.'

She called the unfortunate man who had been her worshipper a 'fellow'!

'In the depth of the glade whither you followed me, where we were alone, I yearned to unfold my heart to you. I told you that I had never loved before I met you. That was false!'

Biscaros started at this unexpected disclosure.

'Yes, I told a falsehood. I have loved—madly loved—one whom I hate now as much as I used to love. I know him now—the scales have fallen from my eyes—he is the meanest of scamps. I shall never live long enough to redeem an error which has cost me dear. He is capable of all crimes—he has robbed, he has——'

'He tried to assassinate me,' added Biscaros. 'His name is Fernand de Saint-Osvin.'

'You spare me the shame of naming him; but I want you to know all. When he threw his witchery over me, I was ignorant of life—I did not believe in evil. He was young and winsome; he was brave, and fought duels for my sake. I put aside others, and, without being approved by my father—though he was under the spell as well—he became my chosen suitor. Why did we not wed? Fatality! Now he deferred the time; then I did so. Once he could have made me marry him, for he had an ascendency over me which I long supported without complaining. He used my

father's influence to enter society, which had repulsed him unattended. And he held me as his banker. Shall I tell you that more than once I paid his debts?'

'You are not teaching me anything new. M. de Saint-Osvin's reputation is made.'

'I know that; but I did not when he came to Mensignac, though I had made up my mind to break with him. On that day I told him that all was over between us. He instantly divined that I loved you.'

'And he took a shot at me.'

'Yes. I was nearly the cause of your death. If he had not missed you, I swear to you that I should have killed him—outright—with my own hands! I am but a woman, but when I am offended, I avenge myself.'

Biscaros had no doubt of it.

'Do you know what he dared propose to me after having attempted to murder you? He had the audacity to tell me that he would ruin me—he would show my letters to my father, so that he would gladly be given my hand; but as I loathed him, and I loved another, he would, in kindness, let me go my way unimpeded if I would help him to obtain the hand of my half-sister. He consented to leave me if I helped him to this compensation.'

Dolores might have added that she had made the offer.

'I did not accept this hateful bargain, and he dispensed with my aid, and tried to injure the poor girl's fair fame by entering her rooms in the night. A miracle saved her. He believes that I

posted her servant in the way to do it, and he has declared war upon me.'

'A war which does not prevent you welcoming him.'

'I! My father is bewitched by him, and it is he who welcomes him, and draws him to our house. He has never perceived what a traitor he is—a mean traitor—and he does not dream that he only waits for him to be removed by death to constrain me to marry him. He has given up his hopes of Nicole, who does not care for him, and has returned to me—though I would rather kill myself than be his bride. Thus do I stand as regards this villain. He threatens me, and presses me to make the engagement. He shall obtain nothing from me, though I am alone in my resistance. I have not a friend—not a confidant, for my sister never was like a sister to me. To whom shall I confide? I dreamed that you were sustaining me in the trials I am going through. I hope you will forgive my frankness——'

'I have nothing to forgive you, and I do not ask any avowals from you.'

'I know,' said Dolores bitterly; 'you feel only indifference for me—perhaps disdain! Oh, I am very unhappy!'

These latter words were almost stifled by sobs, and the lady leaned forward to rest upon Biscaros' shoulder, and deluge him with tears.

This theatrical movement had not been foreseen by Biscaros, who had not time fully to elude it Besides, a woman who leaps at your neck cannot be repulsed by the fist. But she may be seized by the wrists, and this the Gascon did. Holding her

off from him thus for an instant, he felt that he could not end the situation by slow measures, and that he would have to be rough to end it quickly.

The lady had calculated on his gentlemanliness. A moment's overdone delicacy would have been weakness, for she was one of those whose first victory implies a long conquest.

She was staking all on one move, for everything was lost if Aurélien repulsed the attack; he would become a dangerous enemy if not silenced.

What she sought now was less an idolizer than a defender. Her father was dying; her sister inimical; and she trembled at the thought of falling alone into the viscount's clutches.

Here was a spirited youth who could mate that Hector, and she entertained a furious passion for him.

The vehicle rolled more and more slowly along the Boulevard Haussmann, which runs up a rather steep incline to the Avenue Friedland. This slow drive bid fair to be prolonged to the Bois de Boulogne, by Dolores' directions, as she had doubtlessly required time to fight the battle.

Suddenly Biscaros forced her back to her opposite seat, gently enough, though irresistibly, saying:

'I do not love you, and I never shall love you.'

Dolores drew herself up as though a serpent had stung her. In a second her tears dried up, and she said, in a curt and decided tone:

'Do you know what is the worst insult a man can inflict on a woman?'

Aurélien understood, but he took care not to reply, and the lady continued:

'You will soon learn at your expense. I shall

avenge myself, and you will cruelly repent having scorned me.'

'Avenge yourself—I expected as much,' rejoined the young gentleman frigidly, for he had recovered his coolness. 'I shall even be happy if you will kindly charge M. de Saint-Osvin to ask satisfaction for the wrong you complain of.'

'Do you imagine that I would not dare tell him what has passed between us? You mistake. I scorn him so much as not to withhold anything from him—in proof of which I have already told him that I had a little fancy for you. If I needed him to avenge me, I should not hesitate to order him to pick a quarrel with you, and fight you. I am almost sure he would kill you, and that certainly rather tempts me. But death received from his hand would be too mild a punishment. I reserve another for you.'

'May I know what?'

'It is not only your life I aim at, but your honour.'

'My honour is above your attacks.'

'Do you think so? No, you do not believe it; for you know very well that it depends on me alone to send you where you deserve to go—and where you would already be if I had not perjured myself to save you——'

'What do you dare say?'

'Ask your conscience—that will answer you. Tell that to the judges who will question you. To me, it is useless—I saw you.'

'I do not understand you.'

'You are pretending not to understand me. I repeat that I saw you—from the window of our

house—and I also saw the unfortunate man whom you call your friend.'

'Gémozac?'

'You murdered him.'

This impudent speech made Biscaros start, though he had for an instant felt it coming.

It startled him, we say, but it did not long trouble him, and he shrugged his shoulders as he said:

'Whom do you hope to make believe that I murdered my boyhood's companion to steal a few thousand francs?'

'Oh, it was not you who robbed him,' caught up Dolores. 'You were content with killing him. I saw all, I tell you.'

'Just now you boasted of having borne false witness in stating to the Arcachon police chief that you descried a peasant fleeing into the woods; and you asserted to me that you had seen nothing, and lied to save me.'

'It was in saying that to you that I lied. I was in my room, and looked through the window. It was splendid moonshine, and things were as plainly seen as in broad daylight. You came up with Gémozac, and you left him at the moment when he went up near to a large solitary pine-tree at the entrance of the clearing. You made the circuit of that tree, and fired a pistol-shot on your friend, fair and square in the breast, at six paces off. He fell. You ran to him, to make sure he was dead; then you went to our door to knock on it. All this was premeditated: you had formed your plan beforehand; and if anybody had come out, you would have related the story you repeated later to the commissary of police. But you did not foresee

that, whilst you were knocking, a man would come out of the forest and go straight up to the corpse.'

'I know it, for I caught him searching the pockets, and I pursued him and fired upon him. You must have seen that, since you saw so much.'

'Clearly, and I do not doubt that you must have deeply regretted having missed him. To kill him would have been a godsend for you. On him would have been found Gémozac's money, and you would not have had any trouble to make everybody believe he was the murderer.'

'All the less trouble, because it was the truth. The murderer and the thief were one. The first crime was only perpetrated to make the second easier.'

'No; the thief merely profited by the occasion. He saw Gémozac fall—he saw you run to the Châlet, and he jumped to the conclusion that the dead man would have money. If he had meant to kill to rob, he would have killed you also, for he could not have foreseen that you would leave your friend and give him a free field. That is the first idea an intelligent magistrate must have had. Those who examined you were not wiseheads, but I undertake to enliven their wits when they question you again. I will clearly demonstrate that the assassin must be you, and could not be another. I will support this demonstration by swearing that I saw you fire the shot.'

'Then you will be punished for false testimony, as you said exactly the contrary to the police inspector and the investigatory judge.'

'I will say that I told an untruth at first, as I

had pity on you; but that, subsequently, I felt remorse. They will believe me; besides, it little matters if I were condemned to prison, so long as I am revenged.'

'Try! I shall defend myself.'

'Then you mean war? The one I shall wage with you will be without mercy, I warn you.'

'I do not doubt that. I believe this is high time to close this interview. I am going.'

'Not yet. We are in the Avenue de Friedland. My coachman has the order to go around by the main line of boulevards and set me down in the Rue de Vigny. Then we shall see each other no more. But, now, I have not finished, and you must hear me to the end.'

'Go on. What have you to add?'

'That I know you have broken my heart and humbled me. You would have been less unkind if you were not sillily smitten with my sister.'

'I do not hide that; and since you know it, you ought not have forced me to reply to you as I did.'

'Then, you admit that you love Nicole? You dare tell me so?'

'I do dare, if there be any daring required.'

'Where do you hope such a love to lead you? Do you expect to marry her?'

'I do not trouble to project other aims. I love her—that is enough.'

'Well, be content with that satisfaction, for she shall never be Madame Biscaros. Supposing she consents, her father shall oppose such a ridiculous union. If she were to become your wife after his death, he would rise out of the grave to reproach her for marrying beneath us.'

In so speaking, she thought to sting Aurélien in his pride, and make him come out of the calmness he preserved. She did not succeed.

'Is this all you have to say to me?' he inquired, without emotion.

The carriage now went along the Courcelles Boulevard, which it had reached by the Wagram Avenue, and the Rue de Vigny was not far.

'You seem eager to leave me!' hissed Dolores, exasperated at the coolness he perpetually opposed to her overtures.

'I am eager to put an end to a conversation as painful for you as for me,' replied the ever-calm Gascon.

'It approaches its end, as we are nearly at our house, and we shall never see one another again. I mean to leave France if my father dies, and go live in my mother's country; but, before going, I shall have you arrested as a murderer. I have no time to lose in delivering you to justice, for my vengeance would not be complete if this girl whom you love did not learn that you were sentenced to death.'

'I doubt that you will have that pleasure. You may denounce me; but you will not find a court to condemn me, for you know perfectly well that I am innocent. Take care lest you are condemned, when it is discovered why you falsely accuse me. I shall not hold back from informing the court, if you carry your audacity so far. I will tell them what I think of your contradictory statements.'

'What do you think of them, then?' challenged Dolores menacingly.

'I think that, indeed, you saw the assassin—that

you know him—and that you have powerful reasons not to name him.'

'You have only to say that Gémozac was killed by me—a weak woman!'

'A weak woman who told me just now that, if her gallant had not missed me at the hunt, she would have killed him with her own hands—such is the expression she used. But I prefer to believe that you were boasting, and that you did not assassinate the wretch who fell underneath your window. Somebody slew him by your order, and if it be proved that you decoyed Gémozac out there, your complicity will not be doubtful.'

'I believe you are threatening me!' exclaimed the dark-eyed one, mad with rage.

'I answer one threat by another. I defend myself, and I am not afraid of you.'

'I know what remains for me to do. If anything befalls you, you will have brought it on yourself. And I hope that your Nicole will live long enough to know that her wooer is ending his life on the scaffold, or in the galleys.'

'Long enough? what do you mean?'

'I mean that my half-sister is doomed by all the doctors, and will be dead in a month.'

By breaking this funereal news upon the lover, the hateful woman relied on striking to the heart the imprudent man who had repulsed her with scorn.

She missed her mark, from striking too hard.

Biscaros believed that she wished to frighten him by exaggerating the danger Nicole incurred.

He knew by his friend Civrac that Nicole was ailing, even badly, but he did not suppose her life

was in suspense, and the perfidious assertion little affected him.

'Doctors are not infallible,' he said coldly.

'They are deceived sometimes,' coincided Mdlle. de Briouze; 'there is a proof in their not seeing that my father is dying of a malady beyond cure; yet there are cases into which they see clearly, and Nicole's is one, alas! She caught the germ of galloping consumption, as they call it, at Arcachon or at Mensignac, in wandering under the trees or strolling in our park.'

Dolores was on the wrong road. The more she enlarged on the illness, the more Aurélien became persuaded that she was trying to torment him.

'You do not believe me?' she quickly resumed. 'Would you like me to name the three famous physicians who were called in to consultation yesterday, and who, after long study of the patient, did not believe their duty allowed them to keep back from our father that she was doomed without respite, and that the fatal sequel would not delay? Their decree was without appeal.'

'That is not true. If Mdlle. Nicole were dying, I should know.'

'By whom? By that servant-girl who serves as your go-between? Give up that illusion. Bernadette is ignorant that my sister is dying, and she will be expelled to-morrow from our house, never to return. My father has driven her away. So no longer depend upon her spying us. She has only one night to spend under our roof, and she has been shut up in her room. She will never more see her dear mistress.'

'But she will see me! I shall question her, and

if I learn that there is any plot against Mdlle. Nicole——'

'A plot? What's the use of a plot? Nicole has not a month to live, I have already told you. She will quit the world before our father, I am certain, and it is because I am thus certain that I hasten to be revenged upon you. Now I have told you all. We are at the corner of the Rue de Vigny. I shall keep you no longer.'

The vehicle stopped on the Courcelles Boulevard.

The coachman had received precise orders, and he punctiliously executed them.

The lady doubtless meant to go home alone, and not get out of the carriage with a man.

Biscaros was only too glad to finish the stormy dialogue. He opened the door, and, on leaping to the kerb, swung it to behind him.

'You shall both die!' screamed the woman, before he had time to get away.

The vehicle turned down the Rue de Vigny.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WATCHING EYE.

ROOTED to the spot, Biscaros heard the carriage stop, and he saw it moving towards the Boulevard des Batignolles.

The lady had gone indoors.

She had endeavoured to win Aurélien again, but had failed in this last attempt. She had no more to do but revenge herself, and this she would not dally over.

Biscaros feared nothing for himself, but he trembled for Nicole—and upon good grounds.

Dolores, though she lied so easily, might have been truthful in asserting that her sister was down with the pitiless decline which kills so many young girls, and in this case there was no means of saving her.

But, perchance, Dolores meditated hastening the death by means at her command, and she spoke of phthisis to prepare the world for the sudden intelligence that her sister was dead.

The marquis would not allow the autopsy of his daughter's remains. The medical certificate would be credited, and the last word would be spoken.

This idea germinating in Aurélien's brain took deep root there, and he thought no more but of warning his beloved of the danger impending over her.

But how could he reach her?

After the quarrel which terminated with a final threat from Dolores, the door of Briouze House would not be open to Biscaros if he should venture to ring there.

He remembered then that Pierre La Chamade had received the formal order from Bernadette to watch all night in the Rue de Vigny.

Pierre ought to be at his post already, and he was a precious auxiliary at the same time as a sure friend.

It was not for nothing that the lady's-maid had given this command to her sweetheart. No doubt she had at her disposal some means of communication with him during the night commencing, and to call him to her help in case of pressing danger.

The point was to join the honest resin-gatherer before all, and Biscaros glided along the walls down the Rue de Vigny.

He met not a soul, and he perceived not a light shining in the front windows of Briouze House. Still, its inmates would not be a-bed, as it was not much past nine o'clock.

Biscaros thought to make the circuit of it by way of the Parc Monceau, where he expected to find Pierre. In his expectation he was not deceived.

The gardens were still open at the end of the Avenue Van-Dyck. Biscaros perceived the peasant sitting on a bench, with his face upturned, as though he were contemplating the stars.

He tapped him on the shoulder, calling him by his name, and Pierre, very much astonished to see him, rose, and, pointing to a lighted-up window, muttered:

'That's the sick-room—Mdlle. Nicole's. But Bernadette is not there. If she were I should have seen her shadow pass before the light. The dark lady may have forbidden her being there, but Bernadette would have gone all the same. She must have been locked up in the garret where she is lodged. Has anything new brought you, Monsieur Aurélien?'

'News that the bad sister is preparing an ugly blow,' abruptly replied Biscaros.

'You speak like Bernadette; but have no fear. Bernadette is watching, and so am I. Though they lock her up, she will get out somehow, and come down to her young mistress, and rather than let any harm be done her, she would set fire to the whole house. But nothing will happen to-night,

and I shall see her in the morning. I promised her to wait in the street until she comes out.'

'We shall both see her, for I am going to remain with you. If she calls you before daybreak, there will be two of us to aid her in defending Mdlle. de Briouze. You must have agreed on some signal?'

'She has a key for the carriage-way doors. If she needs me, she will open them, and I'll go into the house along with her.'

'We will enter together,' said the Gascon.

He did not wonder what he could do to save Nicole. He foresaw that some gloomy drama was being enacted in the noble's mansion, and he was bent on it not unfolding without there being one defender to rise between the distressed maiden and the wicked heroine.

Whilst Biscaros and the honest resin-gatherer conferred beneath the window of Briouze House, Nicole was weeping in pain as she reclined on a couch in her room.

She was very ill. Her powers had abandoned her, sleep eluded her, and fever undermined her remnant of health. Already her face had fallen in. Death had furrowed it with his claw-like hand.

Dolores had uttered no untruth when she said that the days of her sister were numbered. But it was one to attribute it to consumption.

Nicole did not cough and was not stifling. She felt only atrocious pangs, to which succeeded deep swoons.

She wasted visibly away. Life slowly grew extinct, and as she preserved all her lucidity of mind, she witnessed her own fading.

To the physical torture was supplemented profound sorrow. She despaired of ever seeing Aurélien again, since he came no more to the house; she felt her perverted sister's hate weighing upon her, and she could no longer rely upon her father to defend her.

He, too, was speeding to the grave. He loved her still, but he was in no state to protect her, or even to heed when she endeavoured to make him understand that a viper in their bosom had vowed the death of both.

Still she could not name this enemy without wounding the heart of the father, whom Dolores' mother had once enthralled, and over whom her child had maintained the spell.

Nicole had no other confidante than Bernadette, and, to complete her misery, her father came to apprise her that she had been misconducting herself, and would be discharged.

It was true. Summoned to appear before the marquis, Bernadette had been accused by his elder daughter of meeting a young man who had come up from Arcachon, and the girl had not denied that she had publicly given Pierre La Chamade a kiss in the Parc Monceau.

She did not even take the trouble to plead an excuse, and she had not remonstrated when her notice to leave was given her by the old nobleman.

But she protested against going at once, saying that there was no right to put a servant-woman out of doors at nightfall in a strange city, and she obtained permission to sleep in the house one night more before the final departure, next morning.

To this concession Mdlle. de Briouze annexed the prohibition for her to enter her sister's apartments, and to see her before she went away.

To which Bernadette boldly rejoined that she would stop waiting on her young mistress at once, but that nobody should prevent her saying good-bye to her on the morrow.

Nicole had learnt this much from her father's mouth, in presence of Dolores, who had accompanied the marquis for fear he might give way. She had even carried impudence so far as to offer the poor invalid the services as nurse of Carmen, the duenna, until she found a new maid.

Nicole had refused with disgust, without her father inquiring the motive of this refusal, which ought to have enlightened him on the true state of things.

It was done as we state.

Nicole felt she was in the toils, and that she must endure the fate prescribed to her by her unnatural sister.

Aurélien was ignorant of what went on ; Bernadette was going away ; Nicole lay alone at the mercy of one who had already tried to murder her reputation, and now conspired against her life.

She would have resigned herself if she had only been able to let Aurélien know that her last thought was for him. But how could she send him this last message ? Communication was cut, since Bernadette had been dismissed ; and Nicole did not dream that the Cadichonne had already taken measures to raise up defenders.

Nicole had the whole of the second-floor of the

mansion—three rooms—as in her suite in the Château de Mensignac, bed-chamber, dressing-room, and a little sitting-room before the sleeping one. The last, rather plainly furnished, was upholstered in China silk, with plenty of knickknacks, as Nicole liked pretty trifles, and her pocket-money went partly to buy artistic toys; the rest went in alms.

Since she had fallen ill, Bernadette used to stay with her until she fell off to sleep, at a rather late hour.

But Bernadette, put under arrest, so to say, had not shown herself, and Nicole preferred to undress and go to bed without assistance, rather than have that of Tia Carmen.

Lonely she waited for sleep to come, and it would not: the mournful thoughts oppressing her kept her wakeful, although she closed her eyes.

She called up memories of the past, and shuddered at thoughts of the future.

Her happy infancy appeared to her like a dream: her mother briefly known, her sister a lively playmate, her father overwhelming her with endearments. Then the horizon clouded as the girls grew to a marriageable age. It seemed that the fair daughter injured the chances of the dark one, and enmity sprang up, to flourish and never to die; nay, it would flourish upon her early grave. Her father loved her still; but it was the fiery spirit of Dolores which gave her the lead in the conflict of filial affection.

Nicole had been without joys, but also without too many sorrows, to the day when she met Aurélien Biscaros. Then, an unknown feeling overcame

her; her heart had spoken, and almost at the same time she learnt that there is no love without suffering. Catastrophe had succeeded catastrophe. She had seen Aurélien arrested and thrown into prison, and he had come forth only to participate in lamentable scenes, and to incur dangers of every kind. Their lives were menaced, and they could not even consult on self-defence.

Things evil had vanquished.

Nicole gave up struggling against them, and prepared to die bravely.

Yet it cost her a pang not to see Bernadette again, if only to thank her for her devotion, and to seek to console herself for the loss of the only friend she had left. She reasoned that Bernadette was full of resources, had still a night to pass under the same roof as her dear mistress, and might manage so as to give her some token of life before she qiutted her for ever.

The chamber where Nicole was thus musing was lighted by two wax-tapers, burning on the mantel-shelf; and the softer gleam of an old Sévres lamp stood near the bed upon a round lacquer table, laden with cups containing potions prescribed by the family doctor—a good soul who cared for his patient with much zeal, and grieved that he could not cure her.

The poor sufferer was just about to leave her reclining-chair to go to bed when her vacant gaze fell by chance on the hangings in front of her.

The candle-light shone full upon this hanging stuff: a white ground embroidered with red flowers, such as do not exist in nature, and are invented by

the capricious fancy of the art-workers of the Far East.

Nicole shivered.

In the centre of one of these artificial flowers she believed she descried a glittering eye fixed upon her.

At the first she thought she had seen badly, and was the dupe of an illusion produced by an effect of light on the silk, which gleamed in the rays.

She closed her eyes to open them almost instantly, and looked with more attention.

The eye was still there in the centre of the red embroidery, enframing it like a black diamond in a ruby setting.

She tried to rise: strength was lacking. She remained riveted to her place by that torpor paralysing a bird's movements when surprised by a serpent.

The eye fascinated her.

Who would be watching her thus?

Her sister, or the frightful duenna, who had already played the spy's part, in the Château de Mensignac, in furtherance of her villainous superior's black designs?

Why this new espial? At Mensignac, Tia Carmen had been charged to arouse M. de Briouze when a man entered his younger daughter's rooms. Was the worthless viscount going to recommence his infamous course, and was he waiting till his victim slept before he stole in, and this time slew her?

At the thought, Nicole felt her blood turning to ice in her veins.

Bernadette was no longer at hand, and she would die in the unfair struggle; for she had no voice to call out, even if there were anybody to come.

All at once the eye disappeared.

Again she believed she was deceived; but she recovered energy enough to rise and walk over to inspect the hangings.

On touching them, she found them pierced with a round hole, confounded in the distance with the dark background of the worked flower. She had to put her finger in it to make sure it existed —it went clean through the partition.

She laid her cheek to it, and felt the draught coming through.

How is it she had never noticed this perforation of the material when she had almost never left her bedroom since her illness? She could not comprehend.

She had the courage to open the door and go through the sitting-room with a candle in her hand.

She saw nobody, and went as far out as the grand staircase, which was still lighted. She listened, and heard no sound.

She evidently was under a hallucination—one of the ordinary effects of fever. She knew this, and cheered herself.

She did not trouble to ask to what end the hole had been cut, and who had done it. She promised, however, to show it to her father, relate what had happened, and ask him what he thought about it.

Nevertheless, she took the precaution of fastening the sitting-room door inside, as it had a door on the landing, and taking out the key.

She returned to her room, happy at getting out of the incident with only a fright.

She did not even think to push the bolt to, so strong was her belief in security in a room only accessible from the staircase side.

She was puzzling how she could have been alarmed by an optical illusion, when her recent emotions exhausted her, and the abruptly quelled fever was succeeded by a dulness which seemed sweet.

Sleep had so long fled from her! Now, she felt it stealing over her, and she gave way gladly to it.

She hastened to drink a few sips of a sedative potion which she took every evening before bed-time, and on her morning awaking, without much result, as it never calmed her.

By some exception, the remedy operated immediately this time; she had a deal of trouble not to doze off before she removed her garments, and she was hardly in the bed before she fell into deep unconsciousness.

How many hours elapsed before she awakened Nicole knew not, for she had utterly lost the feeling of existence; and no price was too dear to pay for this temporary oblivion of all her woes.

On closing her eyes, she little surmised that her fate would be decided during her slumber, and that what she enjoyed might perhaps cost her her life.

Midnight struck, and to judge by the silence throughout Briouze House, its inmates reposed like Nicole.

But appearances are deceitful; all were not asleep.

CHAPTER XX.

WHO COMES BETWEEN ?

DOLORES, with a dark lantern in her hand, like a common burglar, stole slowly up the stairs.

On reaching the sitting-room door she took a key from her pocket, which she inserted in the lock, and she gently opened it.

Placing her lantern on a table, she applied her eye to the peep-hole which she so well knew, for she had more than once made use of it—notably this evening—to spy her sister.

She had not yet seen Nicole sleep, but she had taken her measures to have Nicole sleep a long while this time.

All the medicines brought from the chemist's passed through the hands of Carmen, who had been, during the last few days, adding small doses of arsenic, just what sufficed to destroy Nicole's health progressively, without killing her too quickly.

As soon as Nicole was too far gone to recover, she meant to suspend this treatment.

The widow of a doctor, hanged in Spain for having sold 'succession powders,' this duenna of the good old school of Tofana knew very well that, to prevent any trace of poison remaining in the victim's body, time must be given for its elimination before death ensues.

The Marchioness of Brinvilliers, and the Borgias before her, never proceeded otherwise.

The method can be relied upon ; but the final result is not quickly reached, and poisoners are often pressed to attain it.

It would take six weeks for the unfortunate Nicole to reach the term fixed by the wise Carmen; and Dolores was impatient.

Hence the horrible hag, always ready to serve her mistress, had suggested accelerating Nicole's end by changing the system.

There are quick poisons and slow ones. When they are successively administered, the contradictory symptoms throw the doctors off the track, and they no longer see clearly.

Almost assured of impunity, Mdlle. de Briouze gave orders in consequence, and the duenna, to commence with, had strengthened the poison by adding opium.

The first thing was to send the patient so profoundly to sleep that one could approach her bedside without arousing her, and pour a few drops of prussic acid into a glass of Vichy-water, which she took every morning by medical orders.

This would be the finishing draught, which Dolores meant to administer herself.

It was not without regret that she had decided to precipitate the sequel.

Her siege was made—in other words, she had prepared everything with her accomplice for Nicole to live yet a month or two, and she would have liked to continue to poison with wise slowness.

Tia Carmen, expert in these matters, declared that small doses of arsenic for a week would put Nicole in a hopeless state; then they should cease administration of the poison. She would still live some weeks, and when she died there would be no trace found if, as was not likely, a suspicious physician required an examination of the body.

This plan was well invented, and would probably have succeeded ; for the medicaments reached the patient revised, corrected, and augmented by the abominable duenna without her mistress having to put her hand to the work. Patience alone was required, and Dolores would have had it to the end, had not the amorous passion which devoured her perturbed her reason.

She loved Aurélien with a frantic love, as a tigress is fond of the prey it would devour. On the day when she saw him in the Casino at Arcachon, she vowed to win him. She had failed. She soon perceived that she gained no hold over the brave heart where all the place was taken, and her desire was backed by a furious hatred against her rival, though her next-of-kin.

Then had she doomed poor Nicole to death, after vainly consigning her to the life, worse than death, of marriage with the Viscount de Saint-Osvin. Yet what mattered it if her sister died when Aurélien would not transfer his love? He showed himself more rebellious than ever to Dolores' allurements.

She had determined to play her last card by enticing him into an interview, in which she counted on overriding his refusal.

But she had returned from that mad enterprise humiliated, exasperated, and enraged.

Her vengeance was ready—to kill Nicole with one blow, by her own hand.

At first she had thought of stabbing her whilst she slept; but Carmen, on being consulted, had suggested as sure a means, but one less dangerous.

She possessed an assortment of poisons, and in

her collection figured the most violent of all—prussic acid.

Chemists do not sell it, but still it is to be had.

Carmen had brought out of Spain into France an apothecary who had been employed by her husband in criminal practices. She kept him in charity, and, by means of a recommendation extorted from the Marquis de Briouze, had had him placed as assistant to a professor of chemistry, who little suspected what use was made of the products of his scientific experiments.

The duenna, a monomaniac in poisoning, wanted to have at hand what is requisite to send people to the other world ; and this dependant was charged with keeping up the supply.

She gave him orders, which he executed with zeal and intelligence.

Quite recently, he had brought her a little blue glass phial which, in accordance with his instructions, she kept in a dark cupboard out of the way of the action of air and light.

Carmen foresaw that her mistress meant to finish, and she was devoted to her, even to crime, from Dolores' mother having saved her from the garotte, which she had amply merited, as an accomplice of her husband. She would pay the debt of gratitude by aiding Dolores to poison her half-sister.

On handing the phial to her mistress, Carmen explained the mode of using it.

Prussic acid quickly evaporates, so that, for efficacious action, the victim must swallow it fresh. The surest method of administering it would have been to put a few drops into the sleeper's mouth—

she would have died without uttering a scream or making a movement.

The wicked woman preferred the promptest means.

Still there are some inconvenient features about this radical means. Employed pure, prussic acid leaves a strong odour of bitter almonds, and, moreover, it is not easy to make one absorb it who sleeps with set teeth and closed lips.

On the contrary, nothing is more easy than to mix it with a liquid which will preserve its venomous properties, and which would be drunk by Nicole on awakening.

Carmen advised her to choose this course.

She had even offered to execute the operation, but the dark lady wished to enjoy the pleasure of dealing out death herself to the chosen of Aurélien Biscaros.

The duenna would watch on the first story, whilst Dolores went up in the darkness to the room of the doomed girl.

This programme was in a good way of execution.

Mdlle. de Briouze had gone in a first time as a soldier goes on a scouting expedition, to make sure before the attack of surprising the enemy, and she had seen that Nicole was not then abed.

Now, on returning to look through the peephole, she saw her plunged into an almost lethargic slumber.

She hesitated no longer.

She entered the bedroom and went straight to the bed whereon her sister was lying, her head back on the pillows, and the lips parted.

This attitude seemed designed to tempt the poisoner holding the phial, who had merely to stretch out her arm to drop the contents into the sleeper's mouth.

She had her choice between murder immediate and murder deferred, as the glass full of water stood within reach.

She gave a few seconds to reflection, and chiefly to anticipating the pleasure of killing her rival.

'At last I have her,' she thought. 'Nothing can save her now; and whilst that wretch who crushed me beneath his scorn flatters himself he can still wrest her from me, she will die under my eyes. I shall see her features twitch—I shall hear her death-rattle. If I waited until she drank, I should not have the rapture of seeing her die. Carmen says that she would pass away without suffering. The luckier, she! I have suffered enough since she stole away Aurélien's heart from me. But she has been in agony for a fortnight—I may as well pardon her the rest. Let her die, then! To console me for not having longer tortured her, I shall have the sight of her lover's grief—I will stand at the window to see him weeping as he follows her hearse. Come, come, it is time!"

She unstoppered the phial, and bent over Nicole's face to act with accuracy. The poison had to be poured out closely, in order that Nicole should not lose a drop.

Sure, now, not to miss her mark, she stretched out her arm.

It would not have taken a second for Dolores to pour the poison, when, as the phial neared Nicole's lips, a hand grasped her arm.

She sprang up, trying to shake off the grip, but the hand did not let go, and when she turned round, she found she was face to face with Bernadette.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CHALICE TO HER LIPS.

An imprecation rushed to Dolores' lips, but with her free hand the intervener closed her mouth ; and she dragged her into the sitting-room.

Nicole had not awakened, as the opium was doing its work.

The servant-girl softly closed the bedroom door, and returned to Dolores, who, braving it out, awaited her with head erect and folded arms.

She had had the presence of mind to stopper the phial and put it in her pocket.

It was she who apostrophized Bernadette.

'What are you doing here, you minx?' she challenged, with rare impudence. 'I forbade you leaving your room.'

'Yes, and you locked me in ; but I was lucky enough to have a duplicate key,' returned the lady's-maid, without being abashed. 'I foresaw what game was going on here, and I took my precautions. I have been watching you these two hours behind that tapestry. You never thought to look about you. I kept the run of all your doings, and I only let you go into my young lady's room because I wanted to catch you in the act. I lighted on you in the very nick.'

'What do you presume to say?'

'I say that you are a poisoner. I have the proof in my pocket; not to say anything about the bottle you have hidden. I have better than that; I took to the chemist on the Boulevard de Courcelles the last potion which my young lady tasted, and he found a nice lot of arsenic in it. He put down in black and white the result of his *Ann-Elizas*, as he calls it, and he only wants a word to notify the police. He won't have to wait long.'

'If there's any poison about, it is you who have been using it, hussy!'

'Pooh! None of your big words, if you please! I am not one of your sort, to be called hussy. I am a good bit better than you—and I have got the whip-hand of you.'

Dolores took a step to go out on the landing, but the Cadichonne barred the passage, and said:

'Don't you stir! and don't you think of calling or ringing up the servants, to have me pulled about. Here is a pretty little revolver, which I bought to-day expressly. If you do not keep quiet, I shall throw up that window and fire off a couple of shots. There will still remain four more to make the footmen hold off at a respectful distance, whom you would like to seize me. Besides, I have a friend on the look-out in the street. He will come to my help, I answer for it, and he will not come alone. He will bring a couple of policemen with him. I advise you to keep your place and hear me out.'

'What can you have to say to me?' demanded Mdlle. de Briouze, whom wrath prevented reasoning, and who, indeed, thought she was at the speaker's mercy.

'Many things which will not please you, but you will have to hear them all the same. After that, we'll see what happens.

'In the first place, you began a fortnight ago to poison my young lady with the assistance of your Carmen, who peppered all the remedies my mistress had to take. She keeps a stock of poisons, and I have ferreted out the cupboard where she locks them up. I shall point that out to the police. When they make the list up of that stuff, the old lady will not look pure as snow—nor you neither, for I shall tell why you wanted to kill your sister, and I shall call in M. Aurélien Biscaros as witness. That's a gentleman who knows a great deal about you.'

'Is this all?'

'No, I am only beginning. I shall take some time, for I mean to give you the whole book. During the three months I have been waiting on my young lady, do you fancy I have not had my eyes open? Do you take me for a fool? Tut, tut! I know you now, though you are a marquis's daughter; and you are not a penny the better than your Viscount de Saint-Osvin.'

'I forbid you mentioning that name.'

'Catch me being tender to him! a blackguard who said that I had let him into my mistress's rooms at Mensignac—who cheats at play—who tried to murder M. Aurélien! I shall show him up, too! Even if you were sweet on him, you will not venture to defend him; and you will only think to get yourself out of the scrape, which you will not be able to do.'

'I can dispense with your forecasts. I do not

fear you, and I counsel you to take heed to yourself and those who uphold you. Your resin-gatherer and your M. Biscaros both had a hand in the crime committed under my windows at Arcachon. One killed, the other robbed; and I have only to relate what I saw to have them condemned.'

'You don't say so! Well, let us talk a little about that affair at the Châlet! I was going to do it. Would you like me to tell you what Gémozac came a-looking for when he was murdered, poor man!'

'Looking for? you, of course! You decoyed him thither for a stroll under the pine-trees.'

'Go on, go on! insult me! Enjoy your last moments—you'll sing another tune presently.'

'Enough of your sauciness! Let me pass!'

'That I shan't! I have not emptied my bag yet. When I have done we will talk. Now about Gémozac. You may easily imagine that I noticed his goings on; capering round the Châlet every day on horseback, and all for you, I knew! But I could not believe that he would come after dark.'

'That is not true!'

'For letters! You had invented a post-office.'

Had Biscaros heard this colloquy he must have recalled how Gémozac had also spoken of a letter-box without further explanation. He had often thought over this enigmatical remark since the crime, without being able to divine the meaning.

But the lady had comprehended the allusion beyond doubt, for she visibly turned pale.

'Mark!' proceeded Bernadette; 'I want to tell

you how I discovered "the crock of gold." The police and gendarmes and foresters and all the crew walked by it without laying a hand on it. I was more cunning than them. I was always a-wondering why Gémozac went up to the big pine at the foot of which he fell. It was not on his way up to our house. On the day after his death I went for a walk early in that direction. There were still spots of blood on the dry grass. It quite upset me.'

'Go and tell your feelings elsewhere!' exclaimed the dark lady, impatient to hear the end of the girl's disquieting recital.

'No, that would not interest you. I have something nicer to tell you, to wit: I thought to give a look into the pot to catch the sap,' proceeded Bernadette, laying stress on the final words.

'The pot for the sap?'

'Just so—you know—the little clay cup hung on the pine, rather high up. I had to rise on tiptoe to get my hand into it, but a tall man like Gémozac could easily manage it. That cup was your letter-box.'

'I—I do not understand,' murmured Dolores.

'Oh, but you do!' replied the maid. 'The poor gentleman came out every night to see if there was anything for him in the post-office. This time you wrote him where you would see him next day; but he never knew that, poor infatuated lover!'

'You are mad! If you have nothing else to say to me——'

'Excuse me! I found your billet-doux, and I

have kept it. You cannot deny it was in the resin-pot, because it still smells of pitch. You would have come after it next day if I had not secured it, which I did. It is clear as day, and I know it by heart. It said, "My father may come home at any time, and I dare not come out; but I am sure to be out riding on the beach road at nine in the morning, and we might have lunch in the floating restaurant." No doubt he would have gone to meet you, as you put it, if he had read the note; but he never read it—he had no time. At the moment when he was raising his arm to take it, he received a bullet in his breast.'

'Were you by?' sneered Dolores.

'You know well that I was not; but M. Aurélien was by, and he told me how things passed.'

'He forgot to tell you who fired the shot.'

'He could not tell what he did not see—and he did not see the assassin's face any more than I did; but it is just the same, for I know who it is.'

'I do not doubt you do. It was that young man of yours, whom you kissed so tenderly in the Parc Monceau.'

'Pierre? I advise you not to repeat that before him; he would wring your neck, and no wrong done! I am not going to touch you—it will satisfy me to have you arrested. Your case will look nice: a poisoning, a murder—if you did not commit it you hired a rogue to kill Gémozac; and for all your being a nobleman's daughter you will be sentenced. Now, I have said all I wanted to say.'

'I have heard too much. Begone, saucebox!'

'I, go? leaving you alone with my young lady?

Is it likely? You are capable of strangling her while she slept. I am going to lie down in her chamber till Pierre comes after me in the morning. I shall call him in out of the window, and if your servants stop him coming up, I shall scream out for him to go for the police. I know where the station-house is, no great way off. But I am not keeping you. You can go to your rooms. And Carmen, too, is hanging round at the foot of the stairs for you, and she will get impatient. If you delay she may come up, and then—I have my revolver, you know, and I should use it to call Pierre straightway: two shots in the air at the window is the signal agreed upon; the four others being to keep your fish-fag friend and flunkeys in respect. Take my word for it, you had better not force me to try that on—but get you gone! You may even cut away to Spain, the well-matched pair of you, if you feel so inclined, for I am not going to run after you. But I swear to you on the head of my mother that if you do not go—if you are here to-morrow night, you will be locked up before the end of the next day. I shall tell everything, and prove it, too.'

Dolores trembled at this declaration so clearly formulated. The voice least authoritative may at times wear an accent that imposes, and Bernadette's was so firm that it dismayed Mdlle. de Briouze.

Though caught redhanded, the unconquerable woman had preserved her haughty mien, and she had repulsed the servant's attacks with supreme disdain.

But she was at length fully aware that her fate

depended on a peasant who had the wherewithal to master her, and that no consideration would stay her, since she had boldly declared war upon Nicole's persecutor.

The daughter of the revenue officer of La Teste was no ordinary servant. Nobody daunted her, and to defend her young mistress she recoiled from no extremity.

The apprenticeship as lady's-maid which she had served for three months had not domesticated her, and she was quite capable, as she said, of denouncing the poisoner to the authorities.

The lady began to fear that she had gone on the wrong line in acting so loftily with this savage, who dreaded nothing in the world, and might ruin her without respite.

It would be better to try to appease her, and Dolores had too long been under the tuition of the Handsome Fernand not to believe in the power of gold.

'What will you gain by going against me?' she bluntly inquired.

'I do not wish to gain anything,' responded Bernadette. 'All I want is to have my young lady live! and as you would kill her if I let you, I mean to rid her of you.'

'Very well! One can tell at once how to deal with you. I appreciate your frankness, and I am going to be as frank as yourself. You have a sweetheart, and you mean to marry him?'

'It is intended, and he asks nothing better. Go on.'

'If you had fifty thousand francs you would be rich.'

'Too rich. But I have them not, and shall never have so much. Pierre and I do not need that to be happy.'

'True, money does not make happiness, but it contributes to it. Would you like fifty thousand francs?'

'Are you proposing a bargain?'

'An agreement. You can do me harm, and I can do you good. Why should we not come to an understanding?'

'Let me know your conditions.'

'Very simple ones. You will hold your tongue, and start for Arcachon to-morrow. On your way through Bordeaux, at the branch of the Bank of France, you shall draw the sum I offer you. But, beforehand, you must give me the note you found——'

'In the resin-cup. I can understand your wanting to get that back. Is this all?'

'No. You might return from Arcachon and renew your threats. You must quit the country with your lover. Bordeaux is too near, and, on second thoughts, I shall only let you draw on account by a cheque on the bank. You can have the rest in America—North or South—at New York or Rio de Janeiro. You can choose your place of residence.'

'America is far,' remarked Bernadette, pretending to waver.

'Oh no, not too far,' coldly replied Dolores, who believed the agreement was coming into shape.

'Père La Chamade, who has sailed the seas, says that it takes at least ten days to get there, and as many to return.'

'What does that matter?'

'Whilst I am on the water you would have plenty of time to despatch my mistress.'

'She will perhaps die of her complaint. The doctors have said so, and hence I would not be concerned.'

'At all events, I am in your way, and you propose to pay me fifty thousand francs to let you continue the treatment you have so beautifully commenced?'

'Quite so,' said the dark lady. 'I see you are a sharp girl. You understand at half a word, and we are near agreement.'

'Yes,' muttered the lady's-maid, as if to herself. 'You are buying your sister's life for fifty thousand francs. If you inherit from her, it is a mere flea-bite.'

'Do you want more? I will go as high as sixty thousand. But let us finish. If Nicole should awake she would hear us.'

'She will not wake before morning, as you very well know. In mixing opium with her drink this time Carmen increased the dose, my young lady will have at least six hours more of profound sleep. Is this all you have to say to me?'

'Yes, sixty thousand is my last word; but I want that letter at once. You have it with you?'

'Maybe I have.'

'Then we can make the exchange immediately. I have ten thousand francs in my rooms: that will be the first payment on account. I will go and get it for you——'

'Do not put yourself out. It is no use.'

'What! do you refuse, after having accepted?'

'I accepted nothing. I wanted to see how far fear would drive you. I was not wholly sure that the note to Gémozac was yours, for naturally you did not sign it. Now I am certain. If it were not in your writing, you would not have offered me so much money for it.'

'Spare me your reflections. Do you accept—yes or no?'

'Accept? do you believe me so very vile and infamous!' said the girl, folding her arms and taking a step towards Dolores, who receded one step. 'Do you imagine I would sell the life of my mistress? Such bargains are all very well for your viscounts; go and find your ignoble bully, it will come cheaper. Besides my young lady, he would kill your father into the bargain, and when you are alone in the world, you might marry him —it would be a perfect pair. Only it will have to take place on the scaffold or in the penal colony, where he will be sent to join you!'

Her hearer turned pale. Her audacity could not cope with the truths which Bernadette flung in her face, and she finally comprehended that this menial held the fate in her hands of Dolores, the heiress of the Marquis de Briouze.

'You have said your conditions to me,' went on the maid; 'it is my turn to lay down mine.'

At the mention of conditions the dark lady raised her head. She was ready to accept any which might be proposed, as she hoped yet to arrange with Nicole's defender.

'Speak—I am listening,' she murmured.

'Before all, you must go away,' began Bernadette imperiously; 'to-morrow morning you must leave

this house never to enter it again. The ten thousand francs you have in cash will serve to pay your journey. When you are in Spain—or in America, where you wanted to banish me, you can claim your marriage portion. Your father will send you that—perhaps more, and you have a fortune of your own. Nobody here will go to bring you back, for I undertake to enlighten your father on your conduct. Oh, I shall wait until you are out of France, and I know somebody who will make your bully listen to reason if he attempts to raise any riot. I do not prevent your taking Carmen along with you; I rather urge you to do it. If she remains here I shall be obliged to have her arrested, and she would blab about you to get herself out of the pinch. She will say that she only carried out your orders. It will look better if she be hanged in another country.'

Dolores was choking with rage. She did not try even to remonstrate, however, and the Cadichonne went coldly on:

'Your Carmen will be in your rooms waiting for you. In your place I should call her or go after her, so we can make matters clear. I will tell her how she stands, as I did you about yourself. She will understand that I hold you both, and you had better cut away from here instanter. I will open the house-door for you. My Pierre is mounting guard in the street, but I need only say one word to him to get you passed, and I promise you not to have you followed. These are my conditions,' concluded the servant. 'You knew them before, and they have not been changed. Now, decide; but do it quickly. I am not going to wait more

than ten minutes. And I shall not leave here but to let you out.'

The lady did not reply. She seemed petrified, but her eyes flashed, and if a look laden with hate could kill, Bernadette's heir might soon have claimed her assurance money.

But the maid bore the baleful glance, unflinching, and added :

'I forgot to tell you that I must have security. You might return if I did not require it. Your Carmen will have to hand me the key of her cupboard of poisons. I know the rogue who supplies her, and where to find him, if his evidence be needed to prove that the old hag yesterday called on him for something that would kill with one dose. But I want the bottles—the bottles—including the one you put in your pocket——'

This time the woman on the rack rebelled.

'Come and take it, you miserable jade!' she screamed, and she showed the blue phial squeezed in her clenched fist ; 'come, that I may smash it on your mouth, and have the joy of seeing you die at my feet!'

Without being frightened, Bernadette walked, with her revolver out in hand, towards the speaker, and compelled her to draw back, as a bold and skilful fencer drives an antagonist to the wall.

She pushed her on so vigorously that she soon was in the window recess, looking out on the Rue de Vigny ; and when she had driven her there, she said : 'Stand aside, that I may open the window!'

The lady endeavoured to resist, but Bernadette shoved her on one side with so rough a nudge of the elbow, that she fell on her knees.

The other profited by this position to try to snatch away the phial, but Dolores carried it to her lips and emptied it at a draught.

The effect was like lightning.

She rolled over on the carpet, and remained there, flat on her back, with her arms thrown out, just like Gémozac under the great pine-tree by the Châlet des Pervenches.

She had met the fate she destined for her half-sister, and Bernadette did not think of succouring her or sorrowing for her.

She was studying the probable consequences of this unexpected suicide.

Nicole's most dangerous enemy was dead, but the vile duenna lived yet, and she would not fail to essay revenge for her patroness.

The only means to put her out of ability to do injury was to deliver her to justice without loss of time, and the Cadichonne determined so to do. But first Nicole was to be shielded from any new attack.

Bernadette passed into the bedchamber, saw that the young lady was still sleeping profoundly, did not try to arouse her, came out and locked the door with a double turn of the key, which she took away.

Now she was quite sure that nobody would enter the room in the night ; and, leaving the dark lady's corpse where it stiffened, she descended the grand stairs, where she did not meet Carmen, no doubt tired of waiting for her mistress.

Bernadette had traced her course.

CHAPTER XXII.

NEVER THE NEARER.

In a fortnight after the sudden death of Mdlle. de Briouze, the survivors of the domestic tragedy, which had come to an end in so unforeseen a manner in the marquis's house, had benefited by the event which changed the situation for all.

They owed this clearing of the ground to Bernadette.

That courageous girl had behaved with so much energy and presence of mind that she had saved father and daughter, without anyone being called upon to answer for the removal of the general enemy, Dolores, who had executed justice on herself.

No one had beheld the final episode, and Nicole was too deeply sleeping to hear anything.

The duenna, tired of waiting for her mistress, had gone into her room as a spider steals back to its den.

Without arousing any of the household, Bernadette had gone out into the Rue de Vigny. She had conferred an instant with Pierre and Biscaros, related what had come to pass, told them what they would have to do next day, and returned indoors to her room, where she shut herself in until the end of night.

It was Carmen who, prowling around at peep of day, found her mistress extended lifeless in her sister's sitting-room; and she, in distress, lost no time in giving the alarm. Her shrieks had roused

the whole house, and M. de Briouze was one of the first to hasten there.

Nicole did not move out of her lethargy, and Bernadette waited until they came after her.

Two doctors, called in hastily, stated that Mdlle. de Briouze had poisoned herself by swallowing prussic acid, contained in a phial still grasped in her hand.

The police commissary came and opened a summary inquest forthwith, which had not enlightened the shady edges of the catastrophe.

The suicide was plain ; the cause remained to be determined, and this was not in the province of an official who was exclusively bound to make sure whether there was a crime or not. So his inquest remained at that point.

It depended on Bernadette alone to reveal the culpable act of the Tia ; but, in agreement with Aurélien, she deemed it better to get rid of her without publicity.

To decide the marquis upon dismissing the old hag, M. de Caussade, as his old friend, was asked to obtain the notice to leave.

After deliberation with Camille Civrac, Biscaros told all to Caussade, begging him to do what neither he nor the young judge could do, and the honest Périgordian had not hesitated to serve the good cause.

Endoctrinated by this gentleman, the marquis had consented to send Carmen away ; she did not require much pressing to depart without asking explanation. Generously paid by M. de Briouze, who little suspected what part she had played, she left, with the key of the poison storehouse.

Nicole's defenders had the coast clear, and they acted in concert.

Dolores was gone, but the Viscount de Saint-Osvin had not renounced a struggle with the triple coalition.

At the first news of the disaster which wrecked his hopes, he ran to the house, where he found the marquis in such prostration that he had to abstain from openly attacking his adversaries until he should have recovered from the shock received.

Soon consoled for the loss of his patroness, the Handsome Fernand relied upon maintaining the influence he had long exercised over poor Briouze but he soon perceived that all was changed by the death, and that his dupe was escaping him.

Every time that he came to see him, he met Adhémar de Caussade, who had housed himself there permanently, and kept a good guard.

Caussade had quickly taken the upper hand ; the marquis rated him his dearest friend. Thanks to the sway he obtained over the old noble's enfeebled mind, not only did Carmen go away escorting her mistress's body to Granada, to be laid in the family vault beside her mother's, but Bernadette remained in Nicole's service, to the great joy of the latter, whom the girl had saved without telling her so.

Caussade had shown that Nicole could not dispense with Bernadette's intelligent care, and he gained his cause in spite of Saint-Osvin's insinuations, seeking as he did without success to make her out a bad character.

Like a skilful negotiator, Caussade kept his 'friend in the City'—we mean Biscaros—'round the

corner.' The time had not come to produce him. He would come on the stage later, but, meanwhile, Caussade kept him fully informed.

Civrac shared in this intelligence. He collected and noted it in his memory; but his position as a magistrate obliged him to keep aloof until the day when his intervention should be useful to his friend, who had not yet been able to procure his discharge.

Caussade and his adversary the viscount faced one another without striking any decisive blows. They were upon ground where they could not make a thorough attack, and they did not pursue the same end.

Caussade wished M. de Briouze to accept Biscaros as his son-in-law, and that required time and more favourable conditions.

Saint-Osvin no longer hoped to marry the surviving daughter, but he flattered himself he might preserve the post of bosom friend.

No one had yet revealed the viscount's treachery to the marquis. If Nicole died, Biscaros and his party would have to withdraw, and Saint-Osvin would have a clear field to worm himself into M. de Briouze's will. The old noble had none but distant relatives after his last daughter should be lost.

This was the sole chance remaining to Fernand the Handsome, for, since the late event, many who had tolerated him turned their backs on him, and he clearly perceived it.

Hence he would willingly have continued the criminal work of the poisoners; but he had neglected to take lessons of Carmen, and, more-

over, Bernadette was watching the convalescent. Since the odious Tia gave her no more arsenic, Nicole slowly mended. She suffered much less, but her strength did not return.

Convoked anew in consultation, the three princes of science, who had blundered so badly on the cause of her ailment, declared this time that a milder climate would alone cure her. Caussade hastened to propose Arcachon, where cold is never felt, and the salutary emanations of the pine are breathed.

The journey was agreed upon, and the departure fixed for two days after without the marquis opposing, with Nicole's full consent, and to the lively satisfaction of all who loved her.

The honour of having carried this happy resolution belonged entirely to Caussade, who had first had the idea of taking Mdlle. Nicole to the land where had dawned her first love.

At Arcachon she would not only find health again, but the liberty to see her friends who could not freely enter the town-house where the Fascinating Fernand went every day.

Caussade was there regularly to baffle him ; but Civrac and Biscaros held back from appearing, for more than one motive.

At Arcachon there was elbow-room, for the marquis and his daughter stopped temporarily at the Grand Hotel, until they found a suitable villa in which to instal themselves.

After their departure, in September, the Periwinkles Châlet had been let to foreigners for the winter season, and they had to go house-hunting elsewhere.

Nothing prevented our friends from also putting up at the Grand, and this dwelling under the same roof ought to smooth many obstacles.

Caussade and Civrac, who reckoned on this, had sacrificed the time they might have spent more pleasantly in Paris to second Aurélien.

Bernadette, returned into favour of the marquis, would be of the party, and still in her service.

Pierre la Chamade came home by the cheap train, and was oftener seen on the strand than at the Truc de la Truque.

This abrupt flitting was, therefore, a winning stroke, and Caussade would have had more trouble to obtain M. de Briouze's consent to it if the viscount had been in Paris, for he enjoyed his influence yet, and he would have done his best to dissuade him from going.

But the viscount had quitted Paris the night before to pass a week in England, where he had heavy bets impending on one of the last races of the season. He did not foresee that this untimely absence would cost him dear.

Whilst he was the plaything of the ups and downs of the turf, matters were settled to the contentment of all the travellers, including M. de Briouze, who had great need of repose after so much emotion.

He arrived at Arcachon with his daughter, in the same compartment as the three inseparables, who rivalled one another to entertain him, and he congratulated himself at being in such genial company.

At the Grand Hotel he occupied a handsome suite on the first floor, with view of the inner sea.

The gentlemen had rooms nearer the sky, the best they could get, as strangers were arriving in throngs, and there were not many rooms available.

The marquis and his daughter took their meals in their own rooms, and they had not yet undertaken long walks, from being in no state to support them, but they regularly came to the parlours, where M. de Briouze would play billiards with Caussade, whilst Biscaros and Civrac chatted with Nicole.

All went as desired. The marquis recovered strength and lucidity of mind. He seemed to have forgotten the temptations of a life of revelry, as well as his dead daughter. Her death had caused him a sharp emotion, but sudden impressions are not of long duration in some men, and he was one of those who are the sooner comforted when they the more keenly suffer.

Caussade profited by this good disposition to prepare the ground for his dear Aurélien. He vaunted his gifts and tact, which had notably kept him away from Briouze House, where he had been anything but cordially received by Mdlle. de Briouze, and he only awaited the opportunity to say more. But he could not avoid seeing that the suit would not move of itself, and he wished Nicole would help him overcome the resistance he foresaw.

The marquis had redoubled his love for his only child, and his patrician prejudices would not stand against her will, if clearly stated, to marry Aurélien, although the brave and winsome youth wore the very plebeian name of Biscaros.

Caussade gave his ward a hint on this point, and he approved it highly, though a little dubious about Nicole's consenting.

The young couple met every day in the hotel hall, but Civrac was nearly always a third party at their colloquies, and M. de Briouze would have his eyes on them as he moved around the billiard-table. Still this hall was very happily planned to favour such isolation as lovers seek.

By a glass door it communicated with a veranda overlooking the sea-shore. Here one was in a cage of glass: we mean, in view of the occupants of the *salon;* but one could converse without being overheard—an excellent arrangement for the exchange of intimately confidential communications without breaking those social trammels which prohibit a well-bred young lady from conversing with a young gentleman unless under supervision.

Given the cue by Caussade, Civrac was only too glad to leave Aurélien to profit by the facilities presented by this blessed hotel; but still an occasion was wanting.

It was the close of October, and at this season the veranda in question was not an agreeable place, as the breeze whistled into it from all quarters.

The fair ladies who frequent the hotel parlours never ventured into it; and Nicole, whose state of health obliged her to be very careful, had not even yet entered it.

But, on the fourth day after their arrival, the sun rose hot and splendrous over a sea as blue as the Mediterranean.

There was a marvellous sight in the Basin,

smooth as a mirror, enframed as far as eye could see in sombre forests alternating with sand-hills of dazzling whiteness.

'How beautiful it is!' exclaimed Mdlle. Nicole, who was standing chatting in the hall with Aurélien and the amiable deputy-judge.

'Yes,' said the latter, 'it is a superb picture, but from here you see only a corner of it; to admire the whole, mademoiselle, you will have to take the trouble to leave this place and step under the glass enclosure which stands out from the hotel front. Shall we all go out there? Aurélien and I know the country, and can name you the villages along the shore.'

'Oh, yes,' answered Nicole; 'you can give me the lesson in Landaise geography—it will be very amusing.'

Busy at billiards, M. de Briouze heard this, and approved Civrac's suggestion, whilst examining the position of the balls, which presented a difficult stroke; but he almost instantly recalled the young judge to ask him:

'How would you play this position?'

Civrac hastened to retrace his steps, and set to dilating on the theory of the effect of the four cushions, whilst Aurélien conducted Mdlle. Nicole out to the observatory, from which there was so fine a view.

Everything conspired this time for the lovers' confabulation, since the marquis had favoured their going out together.

In reality Nicole wished to admire the Basin of Arcachon, and she had not made it a cover to her isolation with her lover; but Biscaros did not

waste any time in reviewing the beauties of the sea-scape.

'Mademoiselle,' he began, with an emotion which he did not try to conceal, 'I am happy at last at being able to say——'

'That you love me,' interrupted Nicole; 'you told me so at Mensignac, and you have proved it since. I begged you to quit the château immediately, and you did so.'

'And I came very near to seeing you never again!'

'That is true—I have been near to death, but I have escaped by a miracle. I live, and now I feel I am saved.'

'You owe—we all owe—this blessing to Bernadette.'

'I do not wish to know what she has done,' returned the young lady quickly; 'and I entreat you never to speak to me of what happened in our house at Paris since our return there. When I think of it I seem to have had a bad dream—one I wish to forget.'

'I also wish to forget it. I only care to speak to you of the future.'

'And the present, I hope. It consoles me for the sad days I have gone through. My father has been restored to me—freed from prejudices which the evil-minded inspired. He knows now your value, and he becomes more and more attached to you. He told me so yesterday.'

'Is it possible?' exclaimed Biscaros, pale with joy.

'I assure you.'

Then, if I were to ask your hand?'

'I am not aware how he would reply. My father has ideas about family alliances which I respect.'

'Am I, then, to despair?'

'No, not despair, but wait; and let me manage.'

This was precisely what the sage Caussade had advised Biscaros, but the execution of this plan rested upon the lady's consent. And behold! she offered spontaneously to co-operate. Biscaros had nothing more to desire.

'So you will plead for me?' he inquired.

'Yes, because I love you,' answered Nicole straightforwardly. 'But, I repeat, the moment has not come, and I am the only one who can select it. My father has not yet recovered from the shocks he experienced, and he does not yet know you well enough. We are going to pass the winter here, where I saw you for the first time. You will not quit us. He will learn to appreciate you aright, and also that man who exercised an injurious sway over him.'

'The viscount?'

'Yes, the Viscount de Saint-Osvin, his evil genius. He has left him, and he will not return. He must have understood that his reign was over.'

'May you be speaking truth! I own that I do not believe in the conversion of that hardened sinner.'

'I little care whether he has changed his feelings or not. I no longer fear him. My father has openly declared that this blemished nobleman shall never enter his family.'

'Your father did not say that he would never receive him?'

'No; but I have declared to him that I would never see M. de Saint-Osvin again; and I will not be long declaring to him that if he does not allow me to be your wife I shall never marry. Oh, do not thank me! it is not certain that this threat will induce my father to consent to our marriage; but you may rely on this: if he opposes it I shall marry no one else.'

'I do not accept the engagement as you interpret it, mademoiselle. The only daughter of the Marquis de Briouze should marry, and I should eternally reproach myself if I were the cause of a resolution which would be your misfortune. That I should make a similar pledge is simple enough, and I should have no great merit in keeping it, for I love you with all my soul, and there would always be the comfort of thinking that you loved me. But to sacrifice yourself! it would be too much, and I do not deserve your giving up the happiness you might find in another union. Why should I not add that your father may not be wrong in forbidding you to marry me? I have my conscience clear, and I can walk with a high head, but I am still under the ban of a criminal charge. The judge who set me in provisional liberty need only issue a warrant to have me arrested to-morrow.'

'I know it; but I also know that your innocence will shine forth to all eyes; for Bernadette will speak.'

Biscaros started. In relating Dolores's suicide, the lady's-maid had not told him all. He only knew that she had discovered a secret which she had reserved to use in defence; but he was astonished that she should have entrusted this secret, whatever it was, to the other sister.

'No,' resumed Nicole, 'I do not expect to learn that, in loving you, my heart is deceived, and I am not surprised to hear you use this language. It becomes you, and I am pleased at your speaking thus to me. But doubt me not! and do what I ask you—wait!'

'I will wait,' sadly muttered Aurélien; 'but I must not hide from you that I foresee fresh misfortunes.'

'Whence would they come upon us?'

'Can you ask me? Do you forget that man? If he had only tried to murder me, that might pass. But he attempted to injure you in reputation in order to force you to marry him. Do you believe such a man would stop there?'

'If he dare come again I shall denounce him! My mind is made up. I am going to place my father so he must choose between me and this scoundrel, and if my father opens his house to him again, I shall go out on the instant. But I require a promise from you, to cover your actions from the present.'

'What is it?'

'Swear to me that, though he provokes you, you will not fight him.'

'That is the only promise which I cannot make to you.'

Nicole was going to cry out against this rebellion, but the lovers' conversation was abruptly interrupted by the entrance of M. de Briouze, flanked by Civrac and Caussade, whom he had defeated at billiards by reason of the stroke pointed out by the deputy-judge. His mood was brightened by his victory, and he arrived joyous.

'Well, youngsters,' said he gaily, 'have you had enough contemplation of the sea and sky? I grant, though, that this great blue sheet, bordered with white patches, is very lovely.'

'In front of us is the important village of Arès,' said Civrac, to air his topographical information. 'Nearer on our right is Andernos—still nearer, that's Andenge—Biganos—the Teich.'

'Good!' broke in the marquis, laughing. 'I do not doubt your erudition, and that much nomenclature satisfies me. Suppose we take advantage of this magnificent day to have a drive in the Forest?'

'Capital idea,' exclaimed Caussade.

'What do you say to it, Nicole? The air is not too chilly.'

'I should like nothing better, for I am sure it would do me good,' responded the invalid, looking at Aurélien.

'Then go and dress yourself more warmly. I will go and give orders for us to have the hotel four-in-hand. It will take half a dozen easily. By-the-bye, Caussade, did I tell you that I had news from Saint-Osvin this morning? Yes, my dear fellow, he wrote me from London, and his letter went to our town address. He does not know we are down here. He is not at all delighted with his trip to England, for all his bets have gone wrong, and he has lost a large sum.'

'He has had a long enough run of luck elsewhere,' growled Caussade.

'He is trying to recoup himself, I think, for he does not talk of coming back.'

Nicole and Aurélien exchanged a meaning glance.

The prolongation of the viscount's absence ensured the lovers a truce which they hoped to put to profit by obtaining the marquis's consent.

Notwithstanding the entreaty Nicole had addressed him, Biscaros was determined to come to an end with this dangerous and despicable foe, even on the duelling-ground; but he liked the not having his influence to contend with at this moment. He rejoiced to learn that Saint-Osvin was not returning to France as yet.

That he never would return might even be hoped, as well as that he would finish abroad as men do who have neither money nor credit: by making a hole in the head or the water.

'Gentlemen,' said M. de Briouze, 'in a quarter of an hour the wagonette will be ready for us in front of the hotel.'

Nicole had already gone to don an outdoor costume. Caussade and Civrac followed the marquis, and Aurélien was left alone under the glazed shelter.

He had only to put on a topcoat to be ready to step into the carriage, and he was not sorry to enjoy his happiness tranquilly before joining the party.

Nicole loved him enough to marry him: he was sure of that now. What mattered the rest? Sustained by her, he felt he had strength to surmount all the obstacles still separating them.

Undoubtedly Arcachon brought him good luck.

At Paris and Mensignac he had met nothing but vexations and deceptions. On this strand, beside the Casino where his love had sprung into life, fortune returned to him, and he readily forgot the

heavy annoyances which he had suffered six weeks before.

The weather was in concord with his bliss. Never had he better appreciated the beauty of the picture beneath his eyes, and he lingered a little to feast upon it.

From the glass house where he was placed he saw the whole strand to the wooden landing-stage, where passengers embarked for Cape Ferret, an almost deserted stretch of fine sand as the tide was beginning to ebb.

A few beached smacks, around which the fishermen's children were playing, were all the objects in view.

But sitting on the keel of an overturned row-boat was a gentleman—a tourist, probably, for he carried a field-glass case on a sling, and levelled the instrument with remarkable persistence upon the veranda of the Grand Hotel.

This was natural enough, and Biscaros would not have given a second thought to it if the idea had not struck him that this idler was one of his old Bordeaux friends trying to make him out at the distance.

Without any too well knowing why, he stepped forward upon an open terrace preceding the glazed enclosure, serving in summer for the bathers to go directly from the hotel down into the water.

Hence he clearly saw that the gentleman, without ceasing to keep the glasses on him, beckoned him down.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NOVEL CHALLENGE.

THIS was odd, for, if this stranger yearned to speak with him, nothing prevented him coming up to the terrace, only a couple of hundred yards away.

Assuredly Aurélien ought not to have been disturbed.

But the stranger was undoubtedly of a contrary opinion, for he continued to gesticulate like a semaphore.

This action finally puzzled Biscaros to such a point that he decided to obey the prolonged appeal in order to know what the singular character wanted of him.

In his present state of mind everything was suspicious, and he felt particularly eager to clear up what was not self-explained.

He calculated he would have ample time to go and return before he had to get into the vehicle, and he did not hurry—all the less, as it is not easy to walk on shifting sand.

The gentleman still held his glasses up to his eyes, so that Biscaros could not see his face, and he did not change his attitude otherwise.

This quizzing seemed overdone till it became ridiculous, for Biscaros was now within the scope of the naked vision—it was almost impolite.

Aurélien grew more and more persuaded that it was an old friend who wished to play a surprise on him by showing his face at the last moment, and now he hastened to finish with the untimely joke the more quickly.

Suddenly the joker wheeled round without rising. He slung his legs around over the boat which served as his seat, and presented his back. At the same time he put up the double-telescope in its case, as he no longer needed it.

This proceeding, queerer still than the other, so irritated Biscaros that he commented almost rudely on the mocking behaviour of the ill-bred fellow, and, as he did not budge, the Gascon rapidly made the circuit of the boat and faced him.

Then the man rose.

Biscaros beheld the Viscount de Saint-Osvin, and stood petrified with astonishment, for which there was sound foundation, after the letter received by M. de Briouze from London. Biscaros could hardly believe his eyes.

But anger swiftly succeeded stupefaction, and he was about to burst forth when the viscount coolly said :

'Excuse me employing a little trick to attract you here. If you had recognised me at a distance, you would not probably have come, and I am strongly set upon having a private interview with you. I reached Arcachon an hour ago, having learnt in passing through Paris that you were staying at the Grand, where my friend Briouze is, with his daughter. I have my reasons to abstain for the time being from seeing him, and I was going to write to you for an appointment when I caught sight of you. I profited by the occasion. Here you are. We are alone. We can settle this thing, if you are willing.'

'Settle? what thing?' dryly demanded Biscaros.

'I am going to tell you. Be good enough to

take a seat beside me facing the sea, as I do. If M. de Briouze saw us from his window, he might come and join us, which I want to avoid particularly.'

'Have it so,' replied our hero, taking a place next his deadly enemy. 'Now, I am listening. Speak! what do you want of me?'

'I shall be clear and brief; but I must remind you of several matters first. We have only known each other six months, but we have respective grievances not to be forgotten. You began by accusing me of cheating at play. I have been saying everywhere that you killed your Bordeaux friend, and I have done my best to induce Briouze to keep you out of his house. At this nick, his elder daughter dies poisoned—in all likelihood by that Bernadette, who sides with you—and you have taken advantage of my trip to England to get a hold upon my best friend's mind. He has been weak enough to listen to you, and come away to Arcachon with you. You fancy you have got a tight grip on him now, and hope to marry Mdlle. de Briouze with his consent or without it. Now I have come here expressly to stop that game. You see, I am frank.'

'Is this a declaration of war?'

'Just so.'

'I accept it; but you might have dispensed with it. I have long known on what footing we stand.'

'As I did. The fight begins. It will be without quarter, and may take some time. I come to propose a way to shorten it.'

'By making up the quarrel?' disdainfully asked

Biscaros, who believed that the trickster wanted to propose some shameful transaction.

'You do not understand me,' responded Saint-Osvin without emotion. 'On the contrary, I am determined to use all the weapons I hold against you, and I know that you will not be sparing to me. I will denounce you as Gémozac's murderer; I will swear that Mdlle. de Briouze saw you fire on him, as she told me on the day before her death. You may deny and answer my attacks by accusing me of three or four peccadilloes. Bah! what will Justice do if we bring it into our quarrel? I do not know, but I foresee that it will give it hot to both of us. Well, we might settle this difference of ours to-morrow morning without the knowledge of anyone.'

'By an encounter? I ask nothing better.'

'Then we can come to an arrangement. No doubt you think with me that, at this point, one of us is superfluous in this world?'

'I do.'

'Therefore one of us should disappear; but, to give the survivor a free field, the disappearance must be total.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that a duel under ordinary conditions would not have the result you and I desire. On the ground, with either sword or pistol, it is seldom death ensues. The seconds make it up between them that a wound shall end the encounter—sometimes, not even a spilling of blood is compulsory—and they proclaim that honour is satisfied—that's the stereotyped expression. But we are not seeking satisfaction for offended honour—but the

mastership of a place is in dispute. One of us must live, and the other die.'

'We can fight till death ensues.'

'Our seconds would oppose it, or rather, we would find no seconds for a mortal combat, I am certain ; no sooner than if we required a fight over a handkerchief with pistols. They would say it was murder, and back out of it.'

'It is probable.'

'And this is not all. We would be obliged to explain why we fought, and we are both interested in hiding the cause ; for, were it known, the victor would be greatly hampered in enjoying his victory. To do it properly, nobody must even know that there was a duel.'

'I do not see how we are going to manage that —unless we fought on the open sea or on an uninhabited island—and even then——'

'In principle, do you accept the duel without seconds?'

'Yes, provided I am certain it would be fair.'

'You will not doubt when I shall have told you how I understand it.'

'Go on!'

'In the Far West of the United States of America, when two men are determined to stake their lives one against the other, they simply make an appointment in the mouth of a mountain cañon, or on the edge of a wood, for a "fire-as-you-please duel." Each man goes out there with a breech-loading rifle, and plenty of extra cartridges to boot. The first who spies his adversary shoots away at him without any preliminary warning, and the firing is kept up until

one is killed. The other walks away, and nobody inquires where he left the cold meat.'

'This is not the American wilderness; we are in Arcachon, and if we were in those woods shooting at one another——'

'The keepers would come and interfere! and if they found one of the two down, the other would be tried and sentenced for murdering him. Just so. I have hit upon a better place than the Forest.'

'What place?'

'Do you see, there away, two or three thousand yards before us, a black patch on the blue water?'

'A long, flat island? Yes; it is a spit of the *Ile aux Oiseaux*.'

'A tongue of land which only appears at low tide, whilst Bird Island is lived upon by fishermen. The one I point out is half-and-half an island—for six hours it is under water. It is visited only by wild fowlers—but, at the end of October, they do not go out there, as the migration hardly has commenced. Nobody intrudes there—nobody can see anyone there, because at dawn at this season, the fog which covers the Basin has not risen.

'Shots will attract nobody; it will be believed a party is out popping at gulls or Mother Carey's chickens.

'When the meeting is over, the body of the fallen one will remain in the mud until carried off by the rising flood. The crabs will eat it, and, if found, nobody will recognise it without human semblance.

'The other will return from the excursion without bothering about his opponent—and I will tell

you what I shall do if I survive. As soon as I get ashore I should go and put up at the Grand, as though I came in by the morning train. I should appear ignorant of your lodging there with Briouze, and I should take jolly good care not to ask after you. Your friends would be uneasy over your absence, but they would finally believe that you had been drowned whilst out in a boat on the Basin.

'If, on the other hand, it is you who return alone, nobody will inquire about me, as everybody believes that I am still in London. You see that I have foreseen everything. What do you say about my plan?'

'It is unrealizable. To begin with, I have no weapons.'

'I have, though. I never travel without my fowling-pieces; and I have a pair of the same calibre, at the Le Gallais Hotel, where I put up temporarily. You can choose one. I have also ball cartridge. Each of us can take a dozen—that ought to do! We will meet on the shore before starting out.'

'How are we to make the crossing?'

'Do you know how to row?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I have hired two boats. An old seaman, whom I paid in advance, has let them for all the morning, and it is agreed that he shall not meddle in the matter. We shall find them afloat, three hundred yards from the quay, as the tide will be out. There will be only the grapnel to haul in, and a little wetting of the feet to step in. We must push off at six o'clock. There's no daylight

till seven, and the crossing will only take us about fifty minutes. I have inquired on all points.'

'When we land on the islet, it will be light enough for us to take aim, and the tide will come high enough up to wash the spot when we shall have finished—an hour after we land, the sea will entirely cover the sand.'

Biscaros kept silent.

'I have forgotten to mention why I do not suggest our going out in the same boat. It is so we can each land at the point of our respective choosing. This choice may influence the result of the encounter, from which point of view all the advantage would be yours, as you probably know the ground, and I have never set foot on it.'

At this moment the west wind brought to them the sound of a voice which Aurélien recognised as Civrac's; perched on the Grand Hotel terrace, he was hailing his friend, who was wanted for the drive.

'Go!' said the viscount, without turning. 'Your friends are coming after you, and they must not see me. It is agreed, eh? At six, to-morrow morning, on the strand, between the landing-stage and the Le Gallais Hotel?'

'It is agreed,' curtly replied the Gascon.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BUT ONE SHALL RETURN.

In heartily and haughtily accepting the Viscount de Saint-Osvin's strange challenge, Biscaros had

followed his first impulse, which sceptics assert not to be always the best.

On reflection, he regretted having entered so quickly into an adventure which might turn out badly, for the fairness of the Handsome Fernand lacked strong guarantees.

Nevertheless, his instinct, keener than his reason, told him that Saint-Osvin had seriously the intention to end, with a fatal duel, the position of affairs, intolerable for him as for his rival.

This high-class reprobate was not a coward, though capable of committing any crime ; and he had too much wit not to understand that he could not remove Biscaros without, at least, risking his neck.

At Mensignac, the viscount had snatched at the opening to send him a gunshot which, had it met its mark, would have been ascribed to the chapter of accidents in the field ; but the viscount was well aware that, at the present state of things, he ran too many dangers in plainly assassinating his enemy.

Hence he decided to stake all on one throw, and his mind, fertile in imagination, had planned out something most ingenious, although it was difficult enough to put into practice.

He had lost no time in preparing its execution, and chance had wonderfully well served him, as, barely arriving at Arcachon, and strolling on the sands, he had spied Biscaros at a distance on the hotel terrace.

He knew that he had come there with the marquis and his daughter, for he had made inquiries at Briouze House on his way through Paris.

He relied on Biscaros never retreating, and, indeed, he had not retreated.

He never thought of breaking an engagement, and he took good care not to speak to his friends of the colloquy he had had with the marquis's recent friend.

The drive only confirmed him in his resolution to keep the next morning's appointment.

M. de Briouze, who had seemed lately to forget Saint-Osvin, had spoken almost all the time of him, and on several occasions expressed his regret that he was not beside him.

This winning rascal, who had sponged upon him so long, and fooled him to his cost, was a necessity to him.

From this regret to writing for him to come and join him was but a step ; and the viscount would be the sooner answering, as he had anticipated the invitation by arriving at Arcachon.

Then would recommence the battle of the influences ; an unequal one, as the viscount would use, without scruple, the means which Biscaros was repugnant to employ : falsehood and slander under every form.

Far better to deliver a decisive battle, whatever the issue might be.

The evening passed without incident. Nicole retired early ; the marquis followed her closely ; Caussade and Civrac played piquet, and Aurélien went to his room.

Bernadette had leave to go and see her father at La Teste, and she was not to return till the next day, before her mistress would be up.

At eleven, everybody was sleeping, except

Biscaros, who intended to sit up, in fear of not rising betimes, and because he had some work to do in case he did not return from the perilous excursion he was to undertake.

There was his will to write at first, which was not long. He had no near relatives, and he did not venture to leave his property to Nicole. He made Bernadette his universal legatee, to reward her for having saved Nicole.

If the viscount's sinister predictions were realized, this will would never be executed, since the death of the testator would never be proven. But Biscaros knew that the sea often casts ashore dead bodies, and he supposed that his would be identified, if he were killed.

Since he had come to a resolution, he entered into full possession of himself, and he prepared for this irregular duel with as much coolness as though he were only going to take the express early in the morning.

He had the courage, moreover, not to write a farewell letter to his beloved, to be placed where it would be seen, and carried to her when he was no more.

None to Caussade or Civrac. Where was the good? If he did not reappear, his friends would forget him, and that was all, in any case.

If, on the contrary, he survived the encounter, he could relate its story, and ask for their advice; for, whatever M. de Saint-Osvin asserted, it was reasonable that what occurred on the islet would be known, and Biscaros did not wish again to be taken for an assassin. It was quite enough to be accused of killing Gémozac.

The night passed quickly, and about five in the morning he opened his window to see what kind of weather it was.

There was not a breath of wind, and the stars sparkled in a clear sky; but a thick fog hid the sea, and Aurélien felt the damp chill of an autumnal morning.

Consequently he donned thick warm clothes and stout shooting-boots, well knowing that the island soil was miry.

It was anything but an orthodox affair of honour, and Biscaros had a right to dress as he liked.

His adversary would certainly not lay aside his privilege to act freely in that matter.

Biscaros had not to trouble about weapons, as the viscount was to provide them.

At the appointed hour, after having put his will in the dressing-table drawer, he left his room noiselessly, and found the hotel doors open. The day was dawning, and some of the servants were already moving to and fro in the mainyard.

The trysting-place was on the beach; but, to proceed thither, the Gascon took the longest way round, as being the easiest. Instead of going along the shore, with its squeaking sands, he took the broad street, called locally the Boulevard de la Plage, extending along far beyond the landing-stage of the steamboats and the Le Gallais Hotel.

This endless road is bordered by hotels, restaurants and cafés, always well frequented, even in cold weather; but it was not yet daylight; all the shops were shut, and there were no people about.

Without meeting anybody, he reached the road ending at the landing-place, which he intended

to follow till down upon the shore, not far from where M. de Saint-Osvin should be awaiting him.

As he turned to the left, he saw a woman coming towards him who was wearing a black Catalan hat, ornamented with red everlasting flowers in the Landes style.

She accosted him without his having time to stand aside to let her pass, saying :

'Good-morning, M. Aurélien.'

He instantly recognised Nicole's maid.

Of all the meetings that could have occurred this was assuredly the most untimely, and he blamed himself for not having avoided it.

'Where are you off to so early?' continued Bernadette.

'Where? Shooting,' replied Biscaros, for want of finding immediately a better explanation of his rather early outing.

'Without a gun?' inquired Bernadette, eyeing him fixedly.

'Yes. Last night I met one of my Arcachon friends who has been setting nets for wild ducks on the Ile aux Oiseaux. He asked me to go out there this morning to see if we shall find any game.'

'Not a feather! Your friend is laying his nets too soon. The ducks will not be passing over for a month. You will catch a cold, and for nothing; and young ladies do not think lovers with colds in their head romantic,' added the Cadichonne, laughing.

'She will not know I have gone out. I shall be back before breakfast-time, and I ask you not to say you met me.'

'You know I can hold my tongue. Yet I have

news to tell you—the viscount is here! Pierre saw him come in yesterday-noon by the Bordeaux train.'

'I do not deny that; but M. de Saint-Osvin has not stopped at the Grand Hotel, I am sure.'

'That is just what frets me. He must be hatching some mischief. In your place, I should keep a sharp look-out, and give up this shooting-party. My young lady will never have too many friends to defend her. And I shall not be by her all day.'

'Why not?'

'Well, whilst we were having dinner at my father's at La Teste, Pierre and me, a resin-gatherer came over after him from Father La Chamade. The old man is very bad. He fears he is going to die, and wants to see his son—and me, too. Pierre went off straight; he is at no loss to find his way through the forest by night, and by this hour it is full time he should be at the Truc de la Truque. I slept at his father's, and am hurrying to the hotel to get my young lady's leave to go to join Pierre at the Peak.'

'She will not refuse you it.'

'I believe that; but I shall not be easy of mind until I see her again. And who knows when Father La Chamade will let me get away? It appears that he no longer knows what he is saying—he wanders—he babbles about you.'

'About me?' said Biscaros, much astonished.

'Yes, M. Aurélien, about you, and poor Gémozac, and the police commissary, Gujan, and a lot of folk whom he does not even know.'

'This is singular. Suppose I go and see him, too?'

'Faith! you could do no harm in that. I fancy he wants to talk to you about the Châlet affair. I know a good bit myself about it, but he may know more. The old chap has always been a close one; he never says anything, and now he is going away it may be the secret he is keeping that chokes him.'

Biscaros did not doubt this. He remembered the tale of the gold pieces with the head of Louis XVIII., the coincidence pointed out by Civrac; and if La Chamade the elder was going to tell the truth before he departed, Biscaros earnestly wanted to be by to hear it. He would, furthermore, have outstripped Bernadette to the Truc, had he been free to dispose of his morning; but the viscount awaited him, and he could not break the appointment without passing for a coward.

'Come to the Peak, M. Aurélien,' pursued the girl. 'It will relieve the old man, and please Pierre. You will find me there, and I will help you to draw out the old man's confession. But here I am trifling my time away in chattering with you, and I promised my young lady to be home before morning. I must run off. A lucky bag, M. Aurélien! And mind the *crassats*—the quicksands! You know that a man will be sucked down in one of them as if he walked on maize porridge, and you have not put on marsh boots.'

'I know—I know the mud-holes of the Basin, and I shall be careful. Not a word of our meeting.'

Bernadette was already speeding homeward, and the Gascon had no time to run after her to remind her of her promise of silence.

Day was breaking, dull and sad, and the viscount would be at his post.

Biscaros went down upon the strand by stairs at the end of the wooden jetty, and proceeded to the spot.

The sea had gone far out, and was slowly returning.

Through the fog, which had not dispersed, he had some difficulty in discerning, moored a dozen yards apart, two skiffs, which the rising tide began to move ; two *tilloles,* as they are locally called.

On approaching, he saw that one of them was occupied by a man, whose head alone overtopped the gunwale. He soon recognised the viscount, wearing a waterproof hat like a man-o'-warsman.

Biscaros was obliged to wade knee-deep to reach his adversary. The two men who were going to exchange gun-shots exchanged, firstly, a bow as ceremonious as if they were meeting on the fashionable duelling-ground at Vesinet, behind the grand-stand of the racecourse.

'Excuse me, monsieur, for not having waited for you on the shore,' said the Handsome Fernand. 'We can better make the final preparations here, and we can be starting in five minutes. I got into this boat, but I am ready to shift into the other if preferred. They are both alike.'

'I have no preference,' was the cold answer.

'Then, here are the two guns. You see they are of the same length, the same weight, the same calibre. Will you kindly choose?'

Biscaros took one at hazard.

'Here, now, are two packets of ball cartridge ;

verify them, I beg. They are conical bullets, and the guns carry a hundred and fifty mètres. That is range enough, for by the time we land on the islet, it will not be over three hundred mètres wide. The tide has already submerged a part ; we must make haste to get there.'

'I am ready.'

'Then I shall lift anchor, which is, you see, a two-pronged grapnel. Will you please do the same in your boat ? though I can help you, if it's a trouble.'

'It is needless, monsieur ; I am used to it,' replied Aurélien, who had often been out boating on the inland sea.

'Very well ; we can start. You will find a pair of oars in your boat. It is clearly understood that each of us lands where he likes, and how he likes. So much the better for the first ashore. He will have the right to fire immediately, as soon as the other lands.'

'Why not during the crossing ?'

'Because the shots would be heard from the shore ; whereas, yonder, on the isle, the rising land breeze will carry away the sound ; and, mainly, because whoever of us would be killed that way would fall in the boat, and the body be found. Now, I await you. That the chances may be equal, I shall not dip my oar until you have yours out.'

Biscaros, with his gun on his shoulder and his cartridges in his pocket, went and unmoored the other barque, stepped in, by careening it over and getting a knee on the gunwale, and took his seat, without letting his glance go off the enemy.

The two skiffs, impelled at the same time, shot off parallel.

The sea was calm, and the fog covered it like a gray shroud ; but it was less thick along shore, and the villas and hotels could be fairly distinguished in their row.

The imposing mass of the Grand Hotel towered over the other constructions, and loomed up out of the haze as a cliff rises out of the ocean.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FITTING GRAVE.

AT this moment, there, on the first floor, was reposing Nicole de Briouze. Aurélien clearly saw the windows of the apartments she occupied. He gazed on them, whilst manfully pulling, and thought of her.

The poor girl little dreamt that the man she loved was speeding to an almost certain death. What a shock to her if he never more appeared! It would be enough to kill her, for Bernadette would inform her that he had gone out in a boat at dawn for wild-fowling, and she would not doubt that he had perished by accident.

He regretted he had said so much to the Cadichonne, and cursed the chance which led her across his path.

Things looked worse when he saw one of the windows open and a woman appear, who might be Bernadette.

At this distance he could not discern her features, but it appeared to be none other, by figure, stature, and attitude. He questioned himself on what she was doing there, and believed he could guess what had happened.

On arriving at her mistress's, the waiting-woman, although she had promised to keep quiet, had related how she had met M. Aurélien on the way to the wild-duck shooting, and Mdlle. Nicole, disquieted, had ordered her to go to the window, and see if she could descry him on the shore, and in what company.

Biscaros' imagination suggested this elucidation, which might not be the real one; he reasoned that, from so far, Bernadette could not recognise him sitting in a boat and bending over his oars.

Besides, he was not long losing sight of the hotel, and he no longer thought of anything but the fight, trying to calculate the chances on his side.

Before beginning to row, he had loaded both barrels of the gun, which he laid across his knees.

The only thing now was to land at a good place —in other words, far enough off from his adversary not to be surprised by a sudden attack. This was not an easy matter, as Biscaros, in rowing, of course, had his back toward the goal.

On these foggy waters the landmarks were few to guide anyone, and the viscount's boat had already disappeared.

As much as possible, he had to row evenly with both hands, as the only means of not deviating from the straight line, and the islet lay directly before him at the departure.

Accustomed to this exercise by frequent nautical excursions, Biscaros acquitted himself pretty well, but he had to contend with the tide, and did not advance as fast as he could have wished.

Still he was a stronger man than Saint-Osvin, and he flattered himself he had distanced him.

At the end of three-quarters of an hour's pulling, as professional oarsmen call it, he began to wonder if he had not passed the islet without seeing it.

This sham-land was only a stretch of sand, as flat as a sole, covered gradually by the sea and soon to be submerged.

Nothing was more easy than to miss it, and Biscaros, in that case, would have landed on the north shore of the Basin, only three leagues from Arcachon.

In this case the duel would have to be recommenced, and the Gascon, as well as his foe, longed to finish it at once.

He ceased rowing, less to rest than to see where he was, and he looked behind, which he had not done since he started.

The wind was freshening, and the fog was slowly melting. Biscaros believed he saw waves whitening as they curled over a low shore, and he very distinctly heard the seamews scream as they do when gathered on the muddy strand where there is plenty of the sand-worms, crabs, and shell-fish on which they feed.

The islet was not far, and he had not gone wrong, as he feared.

He bent to the oars again, and rowed with all his power to make up for the lost time.

Five minutes afterwards, a shock warned him

that he was grounding on a soft sand, which had no more consistency than bog.

Now was the time to manage with precision and celerity.

He commenced by casting the grapnel overboard, so that, in event of his surviving, he could find the boat, which otherwise would be swept away by the rising tide.

This precaution taken to secure his retirement after the fight, he quickly leaped out and stood at the 'make-ready,' like a sharp-shooter who is on the scout, and is about to use his rifle.

It was prudent, but not sufficient. In warfare, a scout knows in which quarter the enemy lies. But Biscaros could not divine where the danger lurked, as he had not seen Saint-Osvin land. He might fire on him from either side as well as from the front, for he showed himself nowhere.

There was not much to be seen any way on account of the fog, which the breeze lifted by fits and starts, but let fall again like a veil on the muddy foreshore.

There were two courses to choose between : to wait firmly for the enemy to appear, or go in search of him and try to surprise him within gun-shot, to ensure the advantage of first-fire.

Biscaros, who did not like to stand as a target beside his boat, decided at once to go in quest, stepping out to windward.

Thus hunters proceed in order not to startle game, and it was an inevitable move, as the fog was the best preservative against the accuracy of the hostile fire, and the wind brought the salutary fog down on Biscaros.

So he deliberately marched out on an expedition of which he had not foreseen all the difficulties.

He soon discovered that the ground underfoot was quaking, and that he would have hard work to keep his footing. Now he sank knee-deep, now he slipped over slimy beds of green weeds.

Very little more and he would have suddenly measured his length on the gluey algæ—and this was the least of the dangers he ran. For it was better to fall than to blunder into a boghole, where his enemy might pick him off at his ease.

The islet was nothing but a patch of mud, a *crassat*, as the natives say; they never venture on it without putting on wooden soles, much as the Canadians don snowshoes in their country.

But Biscaros, who had previously fished on these perfidious shores, knew that some parts are less soft than others, and are easily enough discerned by marked peculiarities which the trained eye recognises; he did not take a step without scanning the mud and the colour of the seaweed.

He was absorbed in this occupation when he felt his hat knocked off his head.

At the same time he heard a bullet whistle.

The report closely followed the whistling, and Biscaros turned smartly to face the enemy who had fired on him from behind and who had so narrowly missed him; for the projectile had grazed the skull and carried away a lock of hair.

At Mensignac the viscount had fired a little too much to the left; here he had fired a little too high.

The Gascon saw him a hundred paces off, quite

on the edge of the shore, and posted so as to prevent him regaining his boat. He had profited by the fog to execute this turning manœuvre, and had fully succeeded in cutting off his opponent's retreat.

He would have ample time to fire a second time before Biscaros could reply, but, without hurrying himself, he was busy putting a fresh cartridge in his gun.

Biscaros lost not a moment.

He aimed carefully, and fired both barrels at a few seconds' interval.

At this distance he would have certainly put out the eye of a gull, and he stood stupefied at seeing Saint-Osvin still erect.

Moreover, instead of firing anew, he laid his gun in the hollow of his left arm across the body, like a sportsman following his pointer, and he tranquilly proceeded towards his enemy, who had still ten cartridges to use and was reloading.

This was marching upon death, and Biscaros asked himself if the Handsome Fernand had not suddenly become mad. But he would have been mad himself to have spared him.

He let him come within fifty paces and then let him have both barrels, one after another, sharp.

The viscount did not wince, but came on steadily.

Then only did Biscaros understand.

His gun in going off had not made more noise than a firework rocket, and the explanation of the phenomenon was only too simple. His cartridges were charged with only a few grains of powder, and the bullets could not be sent far : indeed, they

fell almost as soon as out of the muzzle. Saint-Osvin had let him make a choice of the two packets because they were worthless alike, whilst his own, in secret supply, contained plenty of first-class powder.

So he did not hurry himself.

He meant not to miss his enemy again, and as he ran no risk in approaching, he was going to fire point-blank.

Biscaros was doomed.

He might have tried to flee, but he did not even think of it. The viscount could have rolled him over like a scudding rabbit.

He threw down his gun, folded his arms, raised his head, and proudly awaited death.

On came the viscount, but he stopped at thirty paces, and took aim. After long levelling the gun, he lowered it and came on nearer, to stop once more, at twenty paces.

'Murderer!' shouted out Biscaros.

'Murderer? no,' sneered the detestable Saint-Osvin, chuckling. 'We played a heavy game, and you lost. So much the worse for you! I will not pardon you; but I shall give you five minutes' respite, time enough to tell you what I am going to do when you are no longer hampering me.'

'Murderer, murderer!'

'You will not even hamper me by your memory, for nobody will ever hear you spoken of. See! how wisely I calculate it: the sea rises, and in a quarter of an hour it will cover the spot where we stand; it will sweep you away, and its currents will carry your carcase out to the Atlantic. None will even know that you are dead. Briouze and his

daughter will believe you ran away because you were going to be taken into custody again. I shall spread the story that there is proof forthcoming of your having slain your friend Gémozac ; and later on, when I shall have recovered the favour of our dear old marquis, I will marry his daughter.'

This was too much to bear.

Mad with rage, the man at bay would not die without trying to kill this taunting devil with his clubbed rifle, and he stooped to pick it up.

The viscount allowed that, and came to meet him, with his gun up to his shoulder to fire when Biscaros should almost touch him.

He wished, as near as could be, to witness the dying agony of Nicole's chosen.

He advanced, we say, whilst Biscaros rushed at him ; but at the moment when he pressed the trigger, the ground gave way under his feet. He plunged to the knees in mud. Losing his balance, he threw up his arms and let go the gun.

The tables were turned.

Now, it was the viscount who was disarmed, and the Gascon could have knocked him on the head as the hunter does the wolf caught in a trap.

Biscaros had presence of mind enough to stop, and what is more, to draw back.

Saint-Osvin had stepped into one of those sink-holes to be met with in muddy spots, which are downright wells of mire.

One step more, and Biscaros would have shared his fate ; but he had seen the danger just in time.

He was saved, and the villain who had a moment before held his life at the mouth of his gun—the

abominable viscount—was to die by the most dreadful of deaths.

In falling into the gulf he had thought at once of recovering the firearm. He felt he was lost, but he wished still to kill Biscaros.

The gun, thrown forward, was no longer within reach; in vain did he strive to struggle on in the sheath of bog which enveloped him ; he could not succeed in touching it.

This useless effort, too, had only embogged him more deeply. He sank little by little, as if a weight attached to his legs were dragging him slowly down into the unfathomable depths of this viscous abysm.

The slough climbed up inch by inch, line by line. It was already up to his waist.

He did not utter an outcry, but his eyes shot lightning-glances at Biscaros. His last thought was one of hatred. He was going to pass away cursing his enemy.

Moved by pity, the latter would have tried to save this man who had twice sought to assassinate him, but he could do nothing, and all that remained to do was to flee from the horrible sight.

The mud was doing its work, coldly, silently, and implacably. Now it oozed over his shoulders, and upon his neck. Only his still threatening face was visible.

The mouth opened to utter a farewell lie.

'So you fancy Nicole escaped me at Mensignac!' cried the dying one sarcastically. 'You are a fool, my dear boy! Bernadette lied to save her mistress —it was Nicole who invited me—it was Ni——'

He never finished, for the slime surged up into

his mouth, smothered the voice, extinguished the light of his eyes, matted his hair and covered it. It smoothed out on a level over the place where he had disappeared.

There was a seething, bubbles struggled through the scum, and that was all.

Fernand de Saint-Osvin was no more.

He had not miscalculated about the sea ; it was coming to cover the spot where he had been blotted out.

Biscaros ran to his boat, which was already afloat, flung his gun overboard, and headed it for the farther shore.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SECRET.

WHEN he landed there, nobody was up at the marquis's windows.

He tossed the grapnel out to 'bite' the sands, and quickly disembarked, very happy at having got out of the scrape so well.

He almost leaped into the arms of Camille Civrac, who had been awaiting him for the last twenty minutes on the beach. He hailed him in these terms :

'Where the deuce do you come from, dear fellow?'

Evidently the Cadichonne had spoken.

'Where do I come from?' faltered the other. 'From—from shooting.'

'Wild ducks?' Civrac ironically finished the

sentence. 'So you told Bernadette—which was very proper of you—but you can tell me the facts of the case. You have been fighting with Saint-Osvin!'

'Fighting? no, there was no duel—it was an attempt at murder. I am still alive, through no fault of that fellow.'

'Killed him?'

'No, thank God! He is dead, but smothered—in the mud.'

'Then there is heavenly justice?'

'Yes, happily, one that is superior to man's.'

'You are hard on the magistracy,' said the deputy-judge, laughing; 'but I will admit that we sometimes err. You know something on that head. But who can help it? Magistrates are not infallible, and when our excellent Sourdeval, the *juge d'instruction*, had you held in custody in spite of all I could say to him, he believed he had the assassin of Gémozac. Now that matters are clearer, what are you going to do? I have come to meet you expressly to ask you this.'

'What do you expect me to do? Would you have me relate to M. Sourdeval that the viscount challenged me to a Wild-West duel, which I was wrong to accept, without seconds, with rifles, firing at will?'

'That is not the question, since Saint-Osvin is out of the world. He will not revive to slander you again. The case before the court concerns the old resin-gatherer of the Truc de la Truque.'

'Yes, I know; the Cadichonne told me he was dying.'

'And asked to confess to you. Bernadette told

me that also, and I rather think Mdlle. de Briouze. She had to say it to her to get her leave of absence. She took a fly, and by this time ought not to be far from Father La Chamade's cabin.'

'Would you like us to go and join her?'

'That will suit me; but M. de Briouze?'

'He suspects nothing, and is still sleeping. We should make a mistake in arousing him, as he would spoil all if he meddles. And I am of opinion we should leave his daughter in repose until our return. I have hired two saddle-horses, which await us on the Strand Boulevard. We have only to mount and be off.'

'I want to change my clothes first.'

'Why? because you are smothered in mud? What does it matter? We are not going to stroll in the Champs Elysées. Besides, if you go back to the Grand, you will meet Mdlle. de Briouze, who will be on the alert to put questions which you will probably be bothered to answer.'

'You are right. I had better not see her now. I am ready to follow you.'

'That's capital! you begin to see how the wind blows, and I begin to hope that all will end well.'

'But Caussade?' timidly inquired Biscaros, who greatly desired the support of that gentleman.

'Caussade will be very useful to you—hereafter—when it will be time for him to use the sway to your profit which he has reconquered over the marquis. Now, he would encumber us. La Chamade does not know him, and he might not like to tell the truth before him. It will be quite enough for me to be by to hear his revelations.

When I get them noted down I shall hie to Bordeaux by the first train.'

'Why Bordeaux?'

'Because Sourdeval is there. He will believe me, deputy to the *Procureur de la République*, if I tell him that the old resin-gatherer has acknowledged himself guilty of the murder of Gémozac, and he will sign, there and then, your order of discharge.'

'I hope so, but it's hard for me to believe that the old fellow killed a man he never saw before, and could not hate. Why should he have committed this atrocious crime?'

'To rob, of course! You forget the Louis XVIII. gold pieces. I remember them, though, and I should have mentioned them already to the investigating magistrate, only for your begging me to do nothing. But the hour has struck for final clearing up, and, for your gain, light must be thrown on the case. And your innocence will be manifested without anyone's head falling, since the culprit is dying naturally.'

'His son will survive him, and he is betrothed to Bernadette, who saved Nicole.'

'Pierre has nothing to fear. It will be easy for him to prove that he never knew whence came the louis his father gave him. Are you coming, old fellow?' asked Civrac, to close the debate.

He was very much attached to his friend, but he was a lawyer, and Biscaros' repeated objections began to annoy him.

'Yes, let us go,' answered Aurélien, rather against his feelings.

He followed Civrac to the spot where the horses were waiting, guarded by an urchin—two little *Landais* horses, which did not look worth much, but they could gallop six leagues without falling foundered.

Civrac drove in both spurs, Biscaros did the like, and the pair dashed away swiftly over the road leading to the Truc de la Truque, through the forest, a rough road if ever there was one, with such steeps that they were soon obliged to moderate their pace.

The Gascon had previously ridden this way under circumstances which memory recalled, on the day when he learnt from Bernadette that Nicole thought of him ; and when, a little later, he received the love-declaration of Dolores.

How many events since those meetings !

And Aurélien's future was not the less gloomy.

'So, really,' abruptly inquired the deputy-judge, whilst their steeds slowly scrambled up a hill, 'it was not you who purged the earth of that scoundrel ? Yet you fought with pistols, did you say ?'

'No, with fowling-pieces. He fired on me—missed me—I returned. It was all useless, for he had palmed off on me some lightly charged cartridges which could not send the ball far—they contained more sand than powder.'

'It was a dodge worthy of him. Did you keep a few as samples of his cunning ?'

'There were a dozen, I fired four. All the others are in my pocket.'

'Keep them, in case you are plagued about your morning excursion to the mud islets of the Basin.'

'I shall do so; I have taken care of the dice with which he tricked at play, though I did not use them to confound him; I hope that I shall not be compelled to show the cartridges to prove that in proposing this duel he had the intention to murder me. Nobody saw us.'

'Let's hope so. Did he engage the boat?'

'He hired two. One I brought back, the other would remain there with the guns.'

'They will not find them, as they would sink in the mud; but the boat will be found.'

'It will be surmised that the person who had it has been drowned by accident.'

'And as the scamp has no friend, nobody will bother about his whereabouts. Therefore you have nothing to fear in that quarter, and for the rest, I rely a great deal on Père La Chamade's confession. But let us arrive in time! A gallop, please!'

Biscaros wanted no urging, and in twenty minutes after the stout little horses reached the Peak without breathing very hard.

There they had to alight; in so doing they perceived at the base of the declivity the vehicle which had brought Bernadette, one of those wickerwork bodies, surmounted by a canopy, and having canvas curtains, which abound in the streets of Arcachon. The driver smoked his pipe whilst his nags munched oats, and he willingly undertook to look after the horses, which it was useless to drag up the hill to the top.

At this moment the friends were rather surprised to see Bernadette running up out of breath, and waving her hand to call the driver for want of voice.

'Well?' asked Civrac.

'Oh, gentlemen, how pat you arrive!' she gasped. 'The old man is asking for you—he wants to see you before he dies—and he will hardly see the hour out.'

'But he did not send you for us,' said Biscaros. 'He could not know we were coming.'

'No, he told me to bring the fly-driver.'

'What! To carry him to Arcachon?'

'Not for that. He has a load on his conscience—a secret—and he wishes to speak it before somebody else than his son and me.'

Civrac and his friend exchanged a glance. The former's conjectures were becoming a reality. La Chamade, pressed by remorse, was eager to make avowals *in extremis*, and at last they would know the truth about Gémozac's taking-off.

But if the Cadichonne was to be credited there was not an instant to lose.

Civrac further thought that the carriage-driver would not be one too many to hear the old cottager's last words, for no one would suspect the testimony of this native, if called upon to repeat before the authorities the confession he might hear, whilst they might doubt the fairness of those who were more or less deeply concerned in the affair at the Châlet.

After having fastened up the riding horses near his ones—though, for that matter, the former had no desire to go away after such a run as they had had—the hackney-carriage driver, encouraged by Civrac, followed Bernadette and the two gentlemen to the clearing where the old seaman had been dwelling for thirty years.

He was stretched on a bed of dry straw at the entrance of his hovel. His son, kneeling beside him, was giving him to drink out of a gourd full of brandy applied to the dying man's lips.

It was a good stimulant, for the old man opened his eyes and propped himself up on his elbows, saying to Pierre :

'Hold me up, lad. When I am on my back I choke, and I must speak before these gentlemen while I have any strength.'

As soon as he was supported by his son, he said to Aurélien :

'Thank'ee for having come. I shall get a smoother send-off after I ask your forgiveness.'

'For what, my honest fellow?' inquired Biscaros, so as not to seem to know what was going on.

'For having let them collar you and clap you in the lock-up, when I had only to say the word to get you out of it. If they had not let you go, I should have gone to tell on myself, but it was quite enough that you were three days in the stone box all on account of me.'

'Mind what you are saying!' charitably interrupted the Gascon. 'My friend here is a magistrate.'

'So much the better!' responded the old sailor. 'That comes in fitly; and I beg him to listen to me : it won't take long.'

Turning to address the carriage-driver, whom he knew from having often seen him bring tourists to the Peak, he said :

'Draw nigher, Médard; you can tell the lads

that I repented before I acted on my last sailing orders, and that I tried to undo the harm I did. You can also tell them how an honest man may become a rogue—occasion does the trick.'

No doubt Pierre had already received his father's confidence, for this opening did not startle him, and his countenance solely expressed deep grief; but the driver appeared stupefied, and the two friends listened attentively. Bernadette wept.

'Yes,' proceeded the old resin-gatherer, 'I have lived too long. If I had died on the sea while I was a-sailing over it, or even after three months in this hovel, I would not have anything to blame myself for. But now I am no better than a thief.'

'And a murderer,' mentally added the Gascon. 'Civrac divined it: this old rogue killed Gémozac.'

'I have stolen gold—coins stained with blood, which I took out of the pocket of a dying man—and I ran away. Aurélien knows all about that, for he saw me, and fired on me—what a pity he missed me! If he had put a bullet into my top-lights, those coins would have been found on me, and my body would have been recognised; but everybody would have said it was sudden madness—nobody hereabouts would have believed that old La Chamade would rob the dead in his senses—and then again, d'ye see, there would have been the gold, and it could have been handed over to the owners.'

'What did you do with it?' demanded Civrac.

'I—I spent it,' stammered the old man, with an

effort ; 'not all. There were twelve hundred francs, and there are eight hundred left—I gave them to Pierre to return to the family of that Bordeaux gentleman. He will work to earn money to make up the loss, and pay it over afterwards.'

Civrac and Biscaros looked at Pierre, who said roughly :

'Yes, I'll repay it ; for I spent it ; and my father took it for me. I am more guilty than he, for if I had not worried him for money to go to Paris he would not have done what he has done. He lost his head, and—and the devil meddled with it.'

This mode of explaining a crime by Satanic intervention appeared inadequate to the young judge, who inquired of the father :

'I suppose you do not pretend that chance brought you in presence of Gémozac? The crime was premeditated—you saw Gémozac come out of the Casino, and you followed him.'

'Nay, I ne'er followed him,' said La Chamade quickly. 'I was cruising round the Châlet of the Periwinkles, because I wanted to have a talk with Bernadette. I knew she had gone to Arcachon, and I was a-waiting to fall in with her as she passed in—I was a-hiding under the pines where I couldn't be seen, but I saw it all. When the Bordeaux gentleman fell, I was within two oars' lengths of him.'

'You are not speaking the truth. The shot was fired close to him.'

'Hullo! are you thinking that I killed him?'

'Who else but you?'

'But I haven't handled a gun or a pistol for years! No, it was not me—why should I lie when I am dying? I confess that I have stolen—I would as well confess that I killed——'

'But if you witnessed the murder, how is it you did not leap out on the murderer? You might have arrested him.'

'No, I couldn't—not such a fast runner; and if I had shown myself Aurélien would have believed that I killed his friend. I never stirred, and the infernal idea only came to me after—when I saw Aurélien disappear behind the house; I do not know what went on in my head—I fancied that the man who fell had plenty of money—the temptation was too strong.'

'And you searched him?'

'Ay—gold was overflowing out of his pockets—I took a handful. Aurélien surprised me, and I cut and run for it. He fired on me and never hit me, worse luck! I got home here still on the run, and next day Pierre was arrested.'

'He was released in three days' time, but the murderer is still sought for. Name him, since you saw him.'

'*Him?* the murderer?' replied Father La Chamade. 'It is the lady with the black hair and eyes—the eldest daughter of that Parisian swell who took the Châlet des Pervenches.'

'Mdlle. de Briouze?' ejaculated Civrac. 'Impossible!'

'I tell you it was her! I made her out all right enough—she had not even taken the trouble to wear false colours. She was hidden behind the

big pine, where she decoyed the gentleman to come, and she blazed away at him with the muzzle almost a-touching him. I saw her dive into the house by a side-door. She must have run up to her room—so quick that if she had been chased they would have seen her a-sitting quietly by the window.'

'She is not here to justify herself—which is why you accuse her,' said the deputy-judge, sceptical by nature and incredulous by profession. 'How was she dressed?'

'As usual. She had put a hooded cloak on her shoulders, but when she ran home the hood flew back, and I saw her face as plain as I see yours.'

'Had you met her before?'

'Very often, near the house and on the Moullo road, and in the forest: she was always in the open air. She came two or three times to the Truc, and spoke to me. How could I help knowing her? In running away she passed hard by, and it was moonlight.'

'But you did not denounce her next day?'

'I should have been denouncing myself. I would have been asked what I was doing there, and I could not have answered. She would have laid it on to me, and folk would have believed that I blamed her to get out of the scrape, and they would have condemned me. I was a coward. I said nothing. And when I heard that all had been set at liberty who had been taken up, I concluded not to blab. It was Pierre who, a-coming back from the capital, told me that the son of my old

shipowner was not safe from being hauled over, and that the marquis's dark daughter was dead. Then I made up my course. I ran about all night like a fool in the forest, and after I had got hot I jumped to the neck in the Cazau canal. It was my good luck to get a death-stroke. I felt that I was gone, and I sent for Pierre at La Teste. I told him all—it lightened the ship, and now I can sail for the new port, since you all have heard the truth. Once again, forgive a poor old fellow—and farewell!'

This was the old seaman's last word. He closed his eyes, collapsed in his son's arms, and glided off into the eternal sleep without convulsion or even emitting that last sigh with which the dying yield up their souls.

Bernadette dropped on her knees, and began reciting the prayer for the dying. Pierre, in too great emotion to weep, remained hanging over the inanimate body. The carriage-driver, very much troubled by what he had seen and heard, could think of nothing but to step outside.

Civrac whispered to his friend:

'Come, my dear fellow—we have no more to do here. I can promise you now that you will marry Mdlle. de Briouze.'

He was a prophet, but his prophecies were not quickly realized, for a whole year passed over this gloomy story ere Aurélien Biscaros was united to Mdlle. de Briouze.

It very nearly never came off at all, as the marquis would not hear of the marriage.

He had resisted the prayers of his daughter and

the advice of his friend Caussade, who did not spare any efforts to bend him. He clung to the idea that he ought to have no son-in-law but a nobleman, and that his descendants must not bear the common name of Biscaros.

But this obstinate refusal was his last act of self-will. The Viscount de Saint-Osvin was no longer at hand to support him, and the solitary struggle exhausted him.

A fortnight after his arrival at Arcachon, general paralysis set in, and made such rapid progress that he could not be taken home to Paris.

He languished six months at Arcachon in a villa hired for the occasion, and died there without suffering or appearing to have any consciousness of his state, but not without often thinking of Fernand de Saint-Osvin.

He longed for him, and complained of his having abandoned him, for he was always ignorant of his sinister end. Aurélien and Civrac took care not to tell him, and nobody else knew.

Bernadette, who suspected it, did not try to learn; the people at the hotel where Saint-Osvin had stopped under a false name for a night, thought he had met with some mishap.

The mud-hole did not yield up the corpse.

The old resin-gatherer's dying confession sheltered Biscaros from what tribulation had previously overhung him, and he owed this happy result to the intervention of his legal friend. He convinced the investigating magistrate, who, after hearing the witnesses of the death of the lonely man of the Peak, issued a definitive order of discharge.

The guilty were no longer in this world, and human justice had to lay down the sword.

After the death of her father, Mdlle. de Briouze could marry. She waited for the end of the term of mourning, and Aurélien waited without murmuring for the release society prescribed.

Friend Caussade was charged with ensuring the orphan a temporary home at which nobody could cavil. He induced a respectable lady of his family to dwell for a year with Nicole in the Château she inherited.

Aurélien went to live at Périgueux, where he was oftener seen on the road to Mensignac than in the Philologie Club-house.

Bernadette had not the same reasons as her mistress to defer marriage. She and Pierre La Chamade did not belong to a world where society's bonds are law. Their wedding took place in spring at the Château.

Pierre was appointed bailiff and head-keeper of the estate the future Madame Biscaros possessed in Périgord.

Bernadette will assist him in the exercise of his administrative functions, whilst herself superintending the laundry, the linen, and the poultry-yard.

Besides, the pair will often come to Paris with their master and mistress, their presence being useful to look after the new household, for Nicole sent away all those who had been in her father's service; and quite right, too, as they had been too devoted to her sister, the viscount, and Tia Carmen.

The two couples will be perfectly happy, as they

deserve: Aurélien and Nicole, for what they suffered; Pierre and Bernadette, for having powerfully aided them against their base enemies.

Bernadette chiefly, who had foiled the odious Dolores by threatening to show the decoy letter found in the resin-cup, and who had twice saved Nicole's life, and had but one fault: the having kept a little too long the half-sister's secret.

THE END.

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